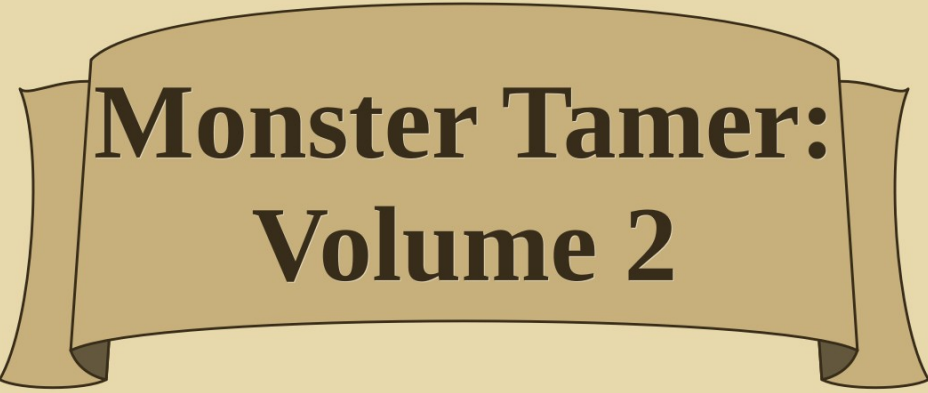




Monster Tamer: Volume 2

Minto Higure

VISIT...

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The cover features two anime-style characters. On the left, a woman with long, flowing white hair and red eyes wears a white, low-cut dress. She is holding a small, orange, fox-like creature on her head. On the right, a younger girl with short, wavy brown hair and blue eyes wears a blue and white outfit with a large white bow at the collar. She has a sword visible at her waist. The background is a dark blue sky with white stars and a large, white, crystalline structure. The title 'Monster Tamer 2' is written in a large, stylized, pink and white font across the bottom.

Monster Tamer 2

Author

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Chapter 1: The New Servant

I suddenly woke up. It was still early dawn. My body trembled slightly. I was unpleasantly cold, something I wasn't used to feeling.

“...Lily?”

The girl who usually cuddled up against me wasn't by my side this morning... Or not. Lily was with me. Even as I slept, Lily the slime was serving as my bed. However, Lily the girl wasn't around.

“Where...?”

I was still in a daze. Lily once told me I was a bad sleeper. I apparently had a tendency to wake up and fall back asleep repeatedly, and my brain functioned below ten percent efficiency. I didn't put much thought into troublesome matters like consistency with what was going on before I fell asleep. Right now, it took everything I had just to focus on the one fact that “Lily wasn't here.” This was more important than anything else, so I sought her out.

Lily responded to my call. The gelatinous blob I was using as my bed wriggled about. Feelers came out to my left and right and wrapped themselves around my waist. If any human who didn't know of the circumstances were to see this, they would probably mistake me for a poor victim about to be devoured by a slime. Yet I didn't panic in the least. This slime was one of my servants, and I was her master, even if it was more than I deserved.

The feelers wrapping around my waist took on the rough shape of arms, undulated once, and then gradually took on a human form. A smooth layer of skin manifested from her fingers to her wrist and up to her elbows and shoulders. I stared at the scene in a daze. Perhaps because of my sleepy state, I could see white sparkles. It was beautiful. I was entranced by the slime's transformation into a girl.

Two soft bulges pressed against my back. And with a thump, thump, I felt the rhythm of life. A girl's sweet breath brushed against my ear. All of this was fake, created by mimicry, but it was no different from the real thing to me.

“Morning, Master.”

I turned around at the waist and was greeted by a smiling girl, though she was still a slime from the ears back.

“Aah, Lily. Mor— Mm?!”

My mouth was sealed shut before I could finish greeting her back. Not only that, using my dazed state as a good opportunity, Lily stuck

her tongue in. It entwined around my own like a living animal. She indulged in her desires to her heart's content with passionate zeal. Her entranced breaths resounded through the quiet morning air.

Lily really likes kissing...

I kind of figured this out on the night we made love. Perhaps it was a fetish of hers. She also desired reciprocation, so it took her quite a while to stop after starting. That was fine. As a man, I couldn't possibly complain. I did worry sometimes though... This saliva I was swallowing in no small amounts wasn't actually Lily's slime fluid, was it?

In a sense, saliva was a human body fluid, but slime fluid felt kind of different. If it was just along the lines of "I love kissing so, so much!" then it was still within the range of being cute. But if it was a more "I feel pleasure in becoming part of the person I love" kind of fetish, then I didn't have much confidence I could answer her feelings even as her self-appointed master.

"...Mwah."

As I pondered over such things, Lily kissed me until she was satisfied. She unwrapped her arms from my neck and released me. I was wide awake now... and somewhat perplexed. What exactly was I up to first thing in the morning? My self-restraint wasn't functioning properly.

"Master..."

Lily had an intoxicated look in her eyes. I knew full well she had a carnivorous nature. I needed to switch gears.

"...Morning, Lily."

"Mm. Thanks for the meal."

"You're welcome... I mean, you got your greeting wrong."

"Ahaha. Morning, Master."

After exchanging greetings, I got up from my gelatinous bed. I shook my head to rid myself of the pink air hanging about me. I rid myself of my wicked desires, seeing as it was still morning, and turned to Lily once more.

"By the way, Lily... Are you okay already?"

A whole day and night had passed since we faced the greatest crisis imaginable on our journey to the east—mortal combat with the white arachne. In the meantime, we stayed at the arachne nest and healed our injured bodies. The wounds Lily and Rose suffered were particularly serious. Lily couldn't make a complete recovery using her own grade 3 healing magic. She still needed time to recuperate. As for Rose, she couldn't properly move around until she finished making replacements for all of her damaged parts.

The reason Lily wasn't maintaining her human form like she usually did while I slept was because she didn't have the leisure to do

so. Looking closer, there was no energy behind her smile. Having just turned from a slime into a girl, Lily was covering her naked chest. Judging from her poor complexion, her pent up desires just now really were quite suppressed.

“Aha... I’m still a little roughed up...”

I brushed her flaxen hair. “Then get to sleep.”

Lily happily squinted her eyes. “Mm. I’ll do just that...”

Her upper body sank away into her slime portion. I continued petting her head until it completely sank in and then gave her silky slime surface one more pat before turning around. A faceless puppet watched over me from a small distance away.

“...Morning, Rose.”

She was another one of my servants—a magical puppet. Apparently, she had been watching from the beginning. This wasn’t a first, but it was still embarrassing. I suppressed my shyness as I walked over to her.

“Good morning, Master.”

Rose was diligently working away with her carving knife, as always, but today she greeted me in a hushed whisper. She likely did that because Katou was wrapped up in her sheets nearby, still sleeping.

“You’re awake rather early today, I see,” she said.

“I just kind of snapped out of it and then got woken up.”

“It can’t be helped. Lily didn’t have a chance to fawn over you yesterday.”

Lily had withdrawn her consciousness for the entire day yesterday, so she wasn’t able to dote on me. That also meant I didn’t get to fawn over her. Her actions just a moment ago were something like a backlash.

“Especially since she was bullied a little by Katou the day before yesterday,” Rose added.

“The day before yesterday, huh? Now that I think of it, I haven’t heard the details of what went on while I wasn’t around. Now’s a pretty good time. Could you tell me about it? I feel like I’ll get a more objective perspective from you as a third party.”

“Understood.”

I spent the next 30 minutes or so listening to Rose tell me about what happened between them while I was being abducted by the white arachne.

“Looks like I owe Katou a whole lot,” I said with a sigh.

She pretty much cleaned up after my mistakes. I had vaguely sensed this uncertainty within my servants before. I was at fault for not taking proper precautions before Lily lost her composure. Even if it weren’t my fault, it was only proper to repay her for taking care of

my servants. She was someone I could trust, so I decided I would definitely protect her. It was somewhat painful that I couldn't do more, though.

"How's your work going?" I asked.

"I finished all the parts for my body yesterday."

Just as she said, there were no more painful-looking cracks anywhere on her body. That wasn't all. She appeared to be made of a different material than before. She looked like a somewhat whitish mannequin now.

Seeing this reminded me of the sword at my waist. Rose had created it for me using her ability as a magical puppet, so it was a magic weapon. Even though it was created by carving wood, it had a metallic feel to it which Lily evaluated as the same as Damascus steel. And right now, Rose's entire body was remade by her own hands. It wouldn't be all that strange if she could bestow the material with a nature different from the wood she used.

"My skills have improved, so the toughness of my body is greater than before. I do believe I will be able to serve you well, Master."

"I see. I'm looking forward to it."

"The problem is all of our equipment. Much of it became unusable after the battle two days ago. Everything must be remade. So, let's see... Please assume it will take about four days to complete them all."

"There's no helping that. I don't mind. Take your time and make them good."

This wasn't an unconditionally bad thing. Rose's skills had improved. A complete replacement for all our equipment meant we could expect an upgrade to our strength in battle. But it also meant Rose wouldn't be able to move for a while. Lily still required time to recuperate as well. This wasn't a major problem, though. These two girls worked hard for me. Rest was a necessity.

The problem was me. I was troubled by fatigue and phantom pains yesterday. Even though there was no threat to my life, my wounds were quite serious. I was healed thanks to the blessing of healing magic, but I didn't regain the stamina I had lost. That was the source of my fatigue. The phantom pains were probably because of the shock to my weak human body.

However, with a full day of rest, my physical condition had recovered. This was enough for me to move around. Not doing any work while being capable of doing so was the definition of laziness, though.

"Sorry, Rose. I have a request for you."

"I shall prioritize anything you ask of me, Master," she said as she knelt before me. "Please ask whatever you will."

"There's no need to be so formal... Oh well. It's about the new

equipment you're making. If possible, I'd like you to prioritize my gear."

"Of course it's possible. I was planning to do so from the beginning."

"How long will it take?"

"Let's see... My work is already in progress, so I should be able to finish them this afternoon."

"I see. Meaning I'll be able to continue exploring the forest starting this afternoon."

"Do you plan on going out already?" she asked in a somewhat astonished voice.

I nodded. "We've been heading east up until now, but it doesn't look like we'll be able to move from here for a while. So, I can use this time to look for new servants. I'm able to move about, after all."

"But Master, just as you know, Lily is still unable to move. Does that mean I am to accompany you and do my work during the night? In that case, the replacements for our equipment will take a while longer."

"No. You continue to focus on making our equipment. Fortunately, there's someone else I can rely on right now."

Rose understood what I was getting at, but her voice was stiff as she said, "...Do you plan on taking just her?"

"What, are you opposed to it?"

"You've still just recovered, Master. I believe it would be best not to push yourself."

"My body has recovered properly, though." I tried wrenching my body around and didn't feel any pain. I was in great health. "But... I suppose you're right. It would be best not to push myself."

I had just caused her to worry about me significantly during the white arachne's attack. It was understandable that her heart was in a sensitive state. I didn't want to worry her any more than that, so I thought it best to compromise in this situation.

"Okay. In that case, I'll relax for today and make sure my body is properly healed. I'll wait until tomorrow morning before I head out. Will that work?"

"...Yes."

Rose looked like she still had something to say, but she stepped down. She was convinced I'd be fine if I spent the full day quietly making sure there were no problems with my body.

While I thought of such things, I gazed at Rose working away in silence. And just around that time, Katou woke up. The three of us had breakfast together and spent some time not knowing what to do.

I wasn't conscious of it before, but it seemed I had a compulsion within me to always be doing something. This time of rest only

brought me pain. But this was problematic. Now that I had already told Rose I would stay put, I couldn't even train my body by doing some practice swings or something, let alone say I wanted to go out again.

"Where are you going, Master?" Rose asked as I stood. She seemed to be taking extra care of watching over me because Lily had to rest.

"I'm just going to get some air outside."

"Is that so? Take care."

She apparently realized I was on edge from having nothing to do. I felt something like astonishment and resignation through our mental path. Thus, I quickly took my leave.



The arachne nest, which was made up of logs tied together with spider threads, had been rather trashed by the battle two days ago. Rose repaired it yesterday while she was working away, so now it was surprisingly livable. Before, it was quite hard for a human to walk around in. But now, I just had to watch not to get my shoe caught on something.

I left the nest and planted my foot on the moss-covered ground outside. Right away I found the white arachne I was looking for.

"Gerbera."

"Hm? My Lord." She shyly moved her spider legs about and smiled.

"Gerbera" was the name I'd given her yesterday. I was already running out of flower names, so it was quite difficult to pick something. Even if I had wanted Lily's help, she was unconscious for recovery purposes. So, in the end, Katou ended up lending me a hand.

"How about Gerbera?"

"It's a flower said to bloom like a spider."

"Great, then it's decided."

She seemed to enjoy picking names for others quite a bit. Even with her meager expression, she looked cheerful the whole time she ruminated over a name. Although, it didn't change the fact that I ended up troubling her with it. I was somewhat apologetic, but I was also grateful. If not for her, the white arachne's name really might have ended up as Tulip.

I didn't have to name her after a flower, of course. After all, I didn't really decide on the name Lily because of the flower. Nonetheless, even if it wasn't necessary, there was sufficient cause.

The person in question didn't like the idea of being the only one not named after a flower. She said she didn't want to be left out, despite the way we met... or, perhaps, precisely because of the way we met. She treasured the idea of companionship. That attitude of hers

was rather cute.

“Oh, yeah, Gerbera. Have you finished that thing I asked you about last time?”

“Mm. I just finished it now. Take a look. What do you think?” she replied with a proud smile.

She held out a white cloth with a silky luster to it. To be more precise, it was simply made clothing woven together with spider threads. I caught a glimpse of how she did it yesterday. Using a few wooden poles and her many legs, Gerbera skillfully weaved cloth from her thread.

I didn't know this myself, but Lily, using Mizushima Miho's knowledge, identified the contraption as a loom. It was apparently modified for Gerbera's own use, but the fundamental technique was the same. The transparent clothing she was currently wearing over her upper body had also been created in this manner.

Given that raw materials were scarce, there was no way we were going to let such a skill go to waste. Of course, the first thing I requested was something for her to wear with a little more substance than her current transparent chiffon-like top.

I confirmed the feel of the clothing in my hands. I had thought spider threads would be somewhat sticky, but this was as smooth as silk. I'd heard before that the natures of horizontally and vertically woven spider threads were different, but these clothes were apparently made of threads that had no adhesiveness to them regardless of such weaving techniques.

“So? Is it not splendid, My Lord?”

She was quite confident. Her pretty red eyes sparkled as she bent over at the waist. She was a little similar to Rose in this regard. Rose's attitude when she presented something she made always had a hint of happiness, pride, and expectation to it. But in Gerbera's case, she didn't have as calm a personality as Rose, so she was practically right up in my face. Actually, it was possible she didn't understand what maintaining a proper distance was to begin with. She was way too close. I could've easily stolen a kiss from her if I were so inclined.

“Yeah, it is. I honestly didn't think it'd be this good.”

“Right? Right?”

“It's quite impressive. Mm... I get it, so give me a little more space.”

I placed my hands on Gerbera's shoulders and put some space between us. My heart throbbed upon touching her dainty frame, but it didn't show on my face... Not that it mattered, since she'd figure it out from our mental path anyway.

“Also, put it on already. Your current clothing is a little poisonous for the eyes.”

It didn't really need to be said after all this time, but Gerbera's outfit really was stimulating. Under the light of day, it was practically transparent and did nothing to hide her skin underneath. And yet she didn't make a single attempt to hide her chest. She was a monster, but she was defenseless enough that any man who lacked a sense of reason would be liable to forget her spider half and assault her.

Well, if that happened, everything would be over in a single blow. Even if nobody attacked her, just meeting her would instantly end in death. I really needed to thank the heavens for blessing me with such a tremendous monster as a companion. However, that was a different matter.

"Get to it already."

Gerbera looked like she wanted more praise, but after pressing her a bit, she honestly complied with my request.

"Very well, understood. There's no need to be so angry... But how strange. You don't look all that dissatisfied, My Lord. You've been staring at my body this whole time, after all."

"..."

It seemed I also lacked self-control. It wasn't on purpose. I did it completely unconsciously... But perhaps, in this case, that was actually worse. Was I maybe dissatisfied with my own desires?

I always slept together with Lily... or rather, I slept on her, but we hadn't made love since our first night. We were desperate to survive, so it wasn't really the time for that. I also felt like it was insincere to yield myself to such acts in our current situation.

Above all else, Katou was always sleeping nearby, and Rose was always awake and working away. I wasn't so driven by my lust that I could perform such acts in a public setting. Having said that, my pent-up desires revealing themselves like this meant I probably had to be more careful. I heard whispers in my head telling me, "You're a man, there's no helping it," but yielding to the devils' whispers would make me no better than someone like Kaga. I couldn't allow that.

"I've finished changing, My Lord."

I shook off such useless thoughts and returned my gaze to Gerbera.

Good, this one's not see-through.

It still showed a bit too much cleavage to be considered wholesome, but it wasn't really my place to criticize girls' clothing. I'd also seen girls my age back on Earth wearing far more revealing outfits.

Also, it really suited her. Her long hair was so white it was fantastical. Her dainty facial features were accented by her mysterious red eyes. From the waist up, she was practically a fairy. Her pure white clothing, goddess-like features, and somewhat childish

expression all made a charming impression.

“How is it? Does it suit me?” she asked.

“Yeah. You’ve very cute.”

“O-Oh? C-Cute...?”

Gerbera’s white skin flushed red in the blink of an eye. Her skin was very pale anyway, so it was easy to see her blush all the way down to her chest. Her lips were curved into a smile. It was pretty natural given her circumstances. Regardless of her beauty, she wasn’t used to being praised. If she were a human girl, I’d be worried that she would be tricked by some bad man.

I waited for Gerbera’s soaring emotions to come back down and then continued our conversation. “Anyway, I talked about this yesterday too, but it’d really help if you could make our clothes from now on.”

At our current rate, what little clothing we had on hand would be rendered useless pretty quickly. I didn’t really want to keep wearing things until they were completely unusable either. It was tough on us both hygienically and mentally. Food, clothing, and shelter were the fundamentals of livelihood. I wanted to improve those as much as we could.

“They should be pretty sturdy, right?”

“Mm. At any rate, these are made of my threads. They can be neither torn nor pierced with ease.”

“How promising.”

“I’ll show that I can make something that won’t tear even if a firefang were to bite into it!”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

If that did actually happen, even if the clothing was fine, my body wouldn’t be able to withstand it. But... I didn’t want to put a damper on her enthusiasm. We had to walk through a forest not meant for humans, so it was obviously better to have sturdier clothing.

Oh yeah, on the topic of walking through the forest...

“Gerbera. Sorry, but can I ask you to do one more thing?”

“There is no need for you to worry about such trifles. I shall do anything I can.”

She looked truly cheerful. It was like she was unbearably happy at being able to do something for her very first companions. This was a good trend. It meant it wouldn’t take all that long for her to get accustomed to us.

“Could you come with me to the forest tomorrow?”

“With you? I don’t mind, of course. But if there is something you desire, then I shall go fetch it for you. It would be but a simple task, even if you ask for the meat of a hundred firefangs.”

“I don’t need so much of that nasty meat, but that’s not the point.

I need to personally go out exploring. Oh yeah, I haven't talked to you about this yet, have I? My monster taming ability requires me to be nearby, you see. So..." I filled Gerbera in on our gap in knowledge.

For the first time since coming to this world, I felt like I was getting somewhere. After overcoming a major crisis, we managed to gain a powerful new companion. I was sure things would go well from now on. That's what I believed.

Chapter 2: Suspicion and Trust

“Sorry for rushing you.”

“...Don’t be.”

The following day, Rose gave me my new equipment. It was the same breastplate, greaves, and large shield I had before. However, these had a different feel to them. Everything was now a hard, blackish material. They weren’t as strong as the pseudo-Damascus steel sword she’d made me, but this was apparently tougher than our old armor. With everyone armed in such a way, we could expect to power up our forces. Rose did a good job, just as she always did.

“Okay then. My preparations are done, so it’s about time I get going.”

I let Rose and Katou know I was getting ready to leave. I then ran my fingers over the surface of the gelatinous monster who was sitting there stock still like an ornament.

“You too, Lily. I’m off.”

She didn’t reply. Lily was holding back her consciousness for the sake of recovery. It was something like sleep to a human, so she couldn’t maintain her mimicry while doing so. She did manage to somehow “wake up” yesterday morning, but seeing her in such poor condition was a little painful. Slimes possessed tenacious vitality, so she was going to make a full recovery in a few days, but it was still best for her to rest until then.

After giving my farewells, I started to take my leave.

“Master.”

But before I left the nest, Rose called out to me. I turned around.

Did I forget something?

“You’re really going?” she asked.

“...This again?”

I knit my brows. Ever since I brought it up, Rose had been against me going into the forest to explore. It had only been three days since our battle with Gerbera; it was perfectly natural for her to be worried. However, it felt like she was taking things too far.

“We talked this over multiple times already. I’m completely recovered. Relax.”

“I understand that, but...” Rose was at a loss for words. “There are other... I mean, right... For example, there’s the problem of safety, isn’t there?”

“Meaning... what? The safety of the arachne nest?”

Safety? Is that why she’s opposed to it? It seems like overthinking to me.

“It’s alright,” I said. “If worse comes to worst, wake Lily up. With the two of you as you are now, I don’t think any monster should be able to steal a march on you.”

Lily was currently in bad condition, but it didn’t mean she couldn’t endure one or two battles. Our forces used to only consist of Lily and Rose anyway. Back when we lived in the cave, Rose was our only guard while Lily was out securing food. Compared to that, Lily and Rose both staying behind was actually safer.

“Besides, monsters apparently don’t come near this nest all that often.”

This was the nest of a high monster. Any monsters which were likely to wander by had been rendered extinct over the long passage of time.

“...Our safety doesn’t matter in the least,” Rose said as she shook her head. “I’m worried about you, Master.”

The way she phrased it made me slightly suspicious. “Hey, Rose. Why are you opposed to me going out into the forest?”

No matter how I looked at it, she was worrying too much. It was strange for her to object in the first place. Even if she had an objection, she was the type to keep it to herself and quietly comply with my decision. Whether that was good or bad, her current behavior was unlike her.

“Rose, are you hiding something?”

“That’s...”

“This is you we’re talking about. You’re keeping your intentions to yourself because you’re opposing my decision, right? There’s no need for such restraint. If there’s something you’re discontent with, then speak your mind. You’re my servant and my precious companion.”

Rose still hesitated even as I urged her on. Nevertheless, I patiently waited for her. Eventually, she dropped to her knee and bowed her head.

“My apologies, Master.”

“...What’s this all of a sudden?”

“I am aware of your feelings toward us servants. I am grateful for them, and I do not wish to put them to waste.”

Rose kept her head down and began expressing her thoughts. I could feel her apologetic feelings and shyness flowing to me through our mental path. But what were these feelings truly about?

Head still lowered, Rose continued. “However, I am unable to trust Gerbera the same way I’m able to trust Lily.”

“...What?” Her confession was unexpected to me.

“Could you please wait for either myself or Lily to be able to move about freely?”

She was basically telling me, “I can’t trust Gerbera, so wait until either Lily or I can come along.”

“...Is that the real reason you’re opposed to me going into the forest?” I felt slightly dizzy. I knew full well how serious Rose was.

“You can’t forgive her?”

“...I can’t.”

“I see.”

Aah, dammit. This was careless of me.

Lily had easily accepted me stretching out my hand to Gerbera, so I completely lost sight of this possibility.

“I exist to protect you. I don’t care if my body is reduced to wood chips so long as I can accomplish this.”

That was what Rose once told me. Even though they were both servants, Rose and Lily were different. The role that suited Rose the most was securing my safety. Her nature was that of a guardian. That was her way. It was perfectly reasonable that she couldn’t forgive Gerbera for injuring me. On the contrary, that was something I should handle skillfully as their master.

“My apologies.”

“Don’t keep apologizing. Your feelings on this are somewhat inevitable, I suppose...”

Even if I was told to forgive the students who tormented me on the day the Colony fell, it’d be impossible for me to do so. They had fallen into a panic. It was a desperate situation. They were perfectly virtuous citizens at one point. The situation itself was at fault, not them.

I could process such thoughts, but that was all I could do. I couldn’t truly feel that way myself. They had all died, but I couldn’t feel pity for their deaths. There were parts of the human heart that couldn’t be settled by reason or logic.

Lily had forgiven Gerbera. But that didn’t mean Rose was more narrow-minded than her. Lily prioritized my heart, whereas Rose prioritized my safety. That’s how it manifested like this. This was what made them individuals. I couldn’t ignore that portion of their personalities. At the very least, I didn’t want to bluntly deny them.

Though it might be somewhat harsh to put it this way, Gerbera was completely at fault. She hurt all of us in her rampage as the incarnation of tyranny. This couldn’t be undone. No matter how much she regretted it, the past couldn’t be changed.

I believed in her, of course. I wanted my other servants to trust her too. However, I couldn’t use that as a pretense to force Rose to trust her. That was different from true trust. A bond formed that way

was completely different from what I wanted between them.

Gerbera had to rebuild the trust she lost upon our first meeting. I wasn't too worried about it, though. She could take her time and slowly build trust with the others. That was actually the normal way of building human relationships. Lily was the exception for so easily accepting Gerbera after they were hostile to each other at first.

What Gerbera needed right now was a credible achievement to her name. With that, Rose would eventually recognize her. Fortunately, Rose had a calm personality. It wouldn't be too hard to get her to acknowledge Gerbera, who was already showing signs of remorse.

Moreover, the current situation was very hard on Rose. She didn't want to suspect a fellow servant. If that weren't the case, I wouldn't feel anything close to shame from her as she confessed to me. Both of them wanted to meet halfway, so they were surely going to be alright. I planned to help them as much as I could as their master too, of course.

Now then... What to do...?

The reason Rose couldn't trust Gerbera was because of the wounds she had inflicted on me. The quickest path to building up trust was to show Rose that Gerbera was useful to me. In that respect, it was the right choice to have Gerbera act as my guard in the forest. If I could come back with new servants, it would easily prove she achieved something.

Leaving our conversation at that, I left the nest. I found Gerbera waiting for me outside. Her legs were folded and she was gazing at the sky in a daze.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting."

"...Don't be. I wasn't waiting long."

Gerbera looked down from the sky with a somewhat stiff expression.

"Did something happen?" I asked as I cocked my head.

"H-Hm? What's this about?" Gerbera stood up in a hurry and turned her back to me. "Come now, we must depart or the sun will set before we get back. We plan to return by dusk, do we not?"

Her behavior was somewhat suspicious, but she had a point. Thus, I set forth from the arachne nest and into the forest.



We made our way through the forest and encountered a bug-type monster called a stab beetle. It was about 70 centimeters tall and looked like an enormous rhinoceros beetle. It was covered in a bulky shell, so it had to be one of the sturdiest monsters in the forest. Its enormous lance-shaped horn was extremely hard and didn't break

from normal impact.

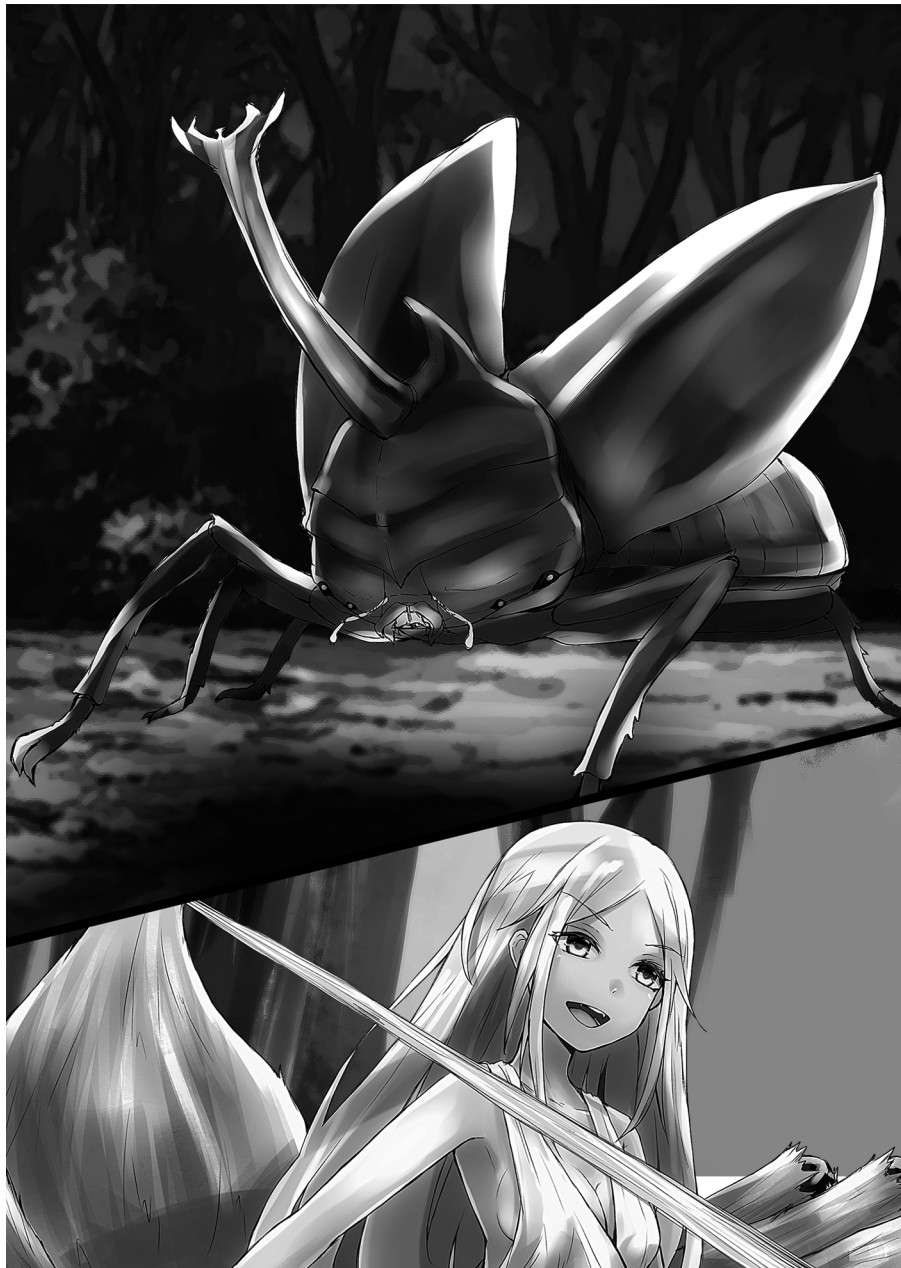
Its specialty was diving attacks from the air. It was very simple yet very effective. In the early days of the Colony, one of the cheaters in the exploration team died from their first encounter with a stab beetle.

The beetle noticed us before we found it. By the time we heard buzzing in the air, it was already high up in the sky. This made it clear I couldn't make it my servant. The stab beetle was hostile to us, and above all else, I couldn't feel the presence of a mental path between us.

It used its potential energy from flying several meters downward to charge at us. It was a ramming attack which used its sturdy body like a bullet. Even if I tried to dodge it, the living bullet could correct its course. At this rate, that enormous lance would pierce my torso and my upper body would have to bid farewell to my lower body. But I wasn't worried in the least.

"Leave it to me."

Gerbera stepped forth and threw a thread into the stab beetle's path.



The beetle ignored the thread sticking to it like gum and continued diving at me, its original target. However, Gerbera wasn't going to let that happen.

"Hmph."

She braced her eight legs and pulled on the thread with her dainty arm. The stab beetle was supposed to be a monster which focused on strength, but it lost its balance and its flight path turned into a crash course. Its splendid horn dug into the ground, shooting up dirt at irregular intervals as Gerbera dragged it to her feet.

"You're done."

Just as the beetle was going to crash into her, Gerbera thrust one of her legs out in a fashion which much resembled a spear master in action. She easily pierced the supposedly hard shell of the beetle. Her leg went right through it and continued on into the ground. After twitching for a moment, the stab beetle fell silent.

"It's over... right?" I asked as I let out the breath I had been holding. I knew of Gerbera's strength, but battle still left me tense. I couldn't accustom myself to clashes over life and death.

"Shall we take a short rest, My Lord?" Gerbera proposed, perhaps seeing the mental exhaustion on my face.

"Yeah. There's no point in pushing myself. Let's take a break."

I sat down on the spot and took a sip of water from the wooden flask I brought along. I felt a slight sense of fatigue in my core. I might have been pushing myself more than I expected. It was a good idea to take more frequent breaks.

"My Lord," Gerbera called out to me as I checked my own condition, "I finished packing."

"That was fast."

Gerbera had a cocoon made of spider thread in hand with the stab beetle's corpse within it. Just as her wording implied, she had packed up the corpse in a way that made it easy to bring back without spilling any of its contents.

As for why we were hauling corpses back with us, they were souvenirs for Lily, who was still resting back at the nest. She possessed the ability to mimic the creatures she devoured. In other words, she could strengthen herself by eating monsters she hadn't eaten before.

It was a little different from my original objective, but this was also a credible achievement for Gerbera. It'd be a great cause for celebration if we could find a new servant too, but... if I had the time to think that, then it was better to get moving already.

I rose to my feet in high spirits. "Okay. Shall we get going?"

"Wait, stop." Gerbera called me to a halt. "You've only just taken a seat. You should rest a little longer. You don't have much stamina,

after all.”

“...Well, I guess that’s true compared to you, but...” I had mixed feelings at being accused of having a weak constitution, but I was comparing myself to the white arachne, the incarnation of tyranny. In her eyes, I probably looked no more reliable than an infant. “Got it. Let’s stay here a little longer.”

“Mm.”

I crossed my legs and sat back down. Gerbera watched over me with a satisfied nod and then folded her eight legs and took a seat herself.

“...”

She was a good three meters away from me.

“Hey, Gerbera. Aren’t you sitting kind of far away?” That kind of distance wasn’t necessary when we were all alone. It was to the point where I would normally assume she hated me.

She averted her gaze awkwardly. “I-Is that so?”

It was clearly suspicious. I could only suspect that something happened.

“Gerbera?” I called her name, causing her slender shoulders to jolt.

“Wh-What is it? I haven’t...”

“...”

“Uuuh...”

I continued to stare at her. Gerbera hung her head like a wilting flower. She was giving in. It was a good thing she was so honest.

“Did something happen?”

“...Are you fine with this, My Lord?” she timidly asked.

“What about it?”

“I just...” she awkwardly muttered, “I just attacked you the other day. Are you not a little afraid of being alone with me?” Her demeanor made it feel like she could vanish at any moment.

“Gerbera...” And that’s when I suddenly realized what was going on. “Did you hear me speaking with Rose?”

“Wh-What about?!” Her voice was shrill, her red eyes were wandering about, and her legs were skittering restlessly. No matter how you put it, she was far too flustered.

“So, you heard us.”

I let out a small sigh and walked up to her. She averted her gaze from me. Her shoulders trembled, but she didn’t try to run away. She simply hung her head in resignation.

“I see. So, that’s why you’ve been acting strangely.”

Rose objected to me exploring the forest together with Gerbera. Having overheard us, she knew Rose still didn’t trust her. That’s why she decided to keep some distance from me.

There wasn't much sense in that when we were already walking through the forest together alone... but I couldn't really tell her that at this point. I knew she was an awkward girl already. If not for that, she wouldn't have caused such a blunder when she chanced upon us that evening.

The problem here was how hard Gerbera took it. The reason she was so down about it was because she blamed herself. Because of her previous hostility, she felt quite indebted to us.

I thought this over for a bit before speaking. "So, what? Do you plan on hurting us again?"

"Impossible! Perish the thought! I'm truly grateful to all of you!" Gerbera practically snapped back at me, but then she suddenly realized what she was doing. Her slender shoulders drooped. "But Rose has a point. I've thought the same thing myself."

Her despondent behavior contrasted her beauty as if she were a flower that had shut its petals.

"I'm dangerous. I may hurt all of you once more. That's the truth..."

Her depression over this was quite serious. I scowled to myself. We were a small team. We had to join forces to survive in this world. Her feeling indebted to us could cause friction in the group.

It was the master's responsibility to look after his servants. I was the one who took her in as our companion, so I had to properly take care of her... That was half true, at least. My main reason was that I couldn't leave her be when she looked so down. But how was I supposed to cheer her up?

As I ruminated over this, Gerbera continued to hang her head. "All of you accepted me. I want to be of use to repay you. Those are my true feelings on the matter." She twiddled her fingers together and looked at me with upturned eyes. "H-However, my inborn nature hasn't changed. Even now, I want to monopolize you. I want to seize you, My Lord... Rather, this feeling in my heart is even stronger than when I first met you." There was a smoldering yearning behind her red eyes as she snuck glances at me. "I may end up hurting everyone even though they have forgiven and accepted me. That frightens me."

The white arachne I named Gerbera was a spider. Her instinctive nature was to capture and tie up her prey. It was natural for her to want to do so, and it wasn't something which could be changed so long as she remained herself. But that didn't necessarily mean it would reflect in her actions. That's what I believed.

We were tied by our mental path. No lies or deceit would work between us. So, it was best for me to be honest. In the end, I decided to say exactly what was on my mind.

"Relax, Gerbera. You won't hurt me... hurt us, ever again."

“Why do you believe that to be so, My Lord?” Gerbera’s legs skittered restlessly, as if she found my declaration rather unexpected. “What Rose said is correct. I can’t trust myself. So, why do you believe that?”

“Why...? Because I saw you that night.”

After we defeated her that evening, Gerbera should have imagined what her future looked like in solitude. Even if she only did so for a short while, the time she spent thinking of such loneliness surely struck a chord in her heart much more strongly than her entire life put together. I went through the same experience, so I could tell. If she found that to be more painful than anything in the world, then she would be fine.

“You said the thought of hurting us frightened you, right? Then you won’t do anything to betray our trust. I mean, the fact that you fear such a future means you’re seriously taking us into consideration.”

That’s why there was nothing to worry about. She wouldn’t lose to her desires and harm us. She had something far more important to her than that, after all.

“I trust you.”

I stooped down in front of Gerbera and gripped her slender hand. It was fine if she could feel my trust through her hand. It was fine if that could give her strength.

“So trust yourself a little more, okay?”

“My Lord...”

Gerbera gazed at me without making the slightest movement. Or so I thought. She brushed off my hand and emphatically covered her face.

I froze on the spot. “G-Gerbera?”

“Um, My Lord...” she muttered.

She hung her head, both hands on her face and her long hair hanging over her eyes. But there was no meaning in hiding her face. I could see her eyes, which were bright red, and her exposed nape, which was dyed scarlet.

“Gerbera? What’s gotten...?”

“My Lord, I understand. I fully understand that you trust me from the bottom of your heart.” Gerbera held out her hand and stopped me from saying any more. “So please, leave it at that... Any more and I may push you down,” Gerbera quietly confessed.

“Oh.”

That had me convinced. Her legs had been skittering incessantly for some time now. This was apparently her holding it in. It was admirable of her to keep to her word, but there was no point in testing her self-restraint any further. I decided to quietly wait for her to calm

down.

Before long, Gerbera called out to me in a flushed voice. "...Sorry. I kept you waiting, My Lord." There was no gloominess left in her expression anymore. "In any case, I understand that you trust me."

"It's not just me. Lily does too."

"Mm. But that does not apply to Rose, does it?"

"Well, that's true."

"What should I do?" She wasn't saying this out of grief. She was optimistically looking for a means of solving the situation.

"So, you want Rose to trust you?"

"Of course," she happily answered without a moment's hesitation.

Seeing her like that, I reflexively began petting her white head.

"In that case, you'll have to put in some effort."

"Ah..."

Gerbera's practically transparent cheeks turned red as she smiled back at me.

"If you'd like someone to trust you, then you'll have to build the reputation to deserve it."

"...Mm, you're right," she said with a bashful nod. "First, we must finish our investigation successfully, correct? Very well, I shall do everything to be of assistance to you, My Lord."

"Yeah. I'm counting on you."

There was no frailty left in Gerbera's expression. It seemed she managed to wipe away her anxieties. A smile naturally came to my face.

Chapter 3: A Deep Cavity Within the Heart

The forest was overflowing with danger. Visibility was poor, branches were everywhere, and any footholds were unreliable. Just moving around required a fair bit of concentration. I couldn't forget that this domain wasn't meant for humans. But failing regardless of knowing such things was what it meant to be human.

"Uwah?!"

My foot slipped. My vision was slightly blurry from exhaustion, causing me to slip on a moss-covered rock. I lost my balance in an instant. In a panic, I reached my arm out toward a tree, but it was just a little too far away.

The moment before I pathetically fell to the ground, something caught my body.

"That was close. Do be careful, My Lord."

"...Thanks."

Gerbera immediately got behind me and stopped me from falling. She was keeping a close watch on our surroundings while also paying attention to me. As a result, my head ended up half-buried in her bountiful chest. But Gerbera didn't seem to care about that. Her face, which now looked upside down from my perspective, was filled with concern.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, sorry for causing you trouble."

"This much is nothing."

Gerbera made sure my feet were firmly planted on the ground.

"..."

She then squeezed my head against her one more time before letting me go.

As I turned and stared at her, in a shrill voice she said, "Wh-What is it?" Her legs began skittering about. This was apparently a nervous tic of hers. "I-I wasn't really thinking of the side benefits or anything."

"Do you know what the phrase 'letting the cat out of the bag' means?"

"S-Somehow or other."

"...Oh well."

There was no point in hounding her over this. I decided to just let her off there and continue our search. Gerbera looked somewhat

relieved as she started advancing through the forest once more.

“...This is problematic,” I muttered to myself as I paid careful attention to my steps.

It was a bit embarrassing, but Gerbera apparently had feelings for me. I wasn't so dense that I didn't notice such a clear display of affection. Although, if it wasn't Gerbera, I might not have noticed. I wasn't popular with girls. I was neither ugly nor handsome. One could say I was completely average and entirely serious. I was aware that talking to me was boring, so it wasn't fun for girls to be with me.

It was out of the question for charming members of the other sex to suddenly fall for a guy like me. That's what I would normally think. However, Gerbera's straightforward demeanor wouldn't permit such escapism.

I was honestly happy about the feelings she directed toward me. How would a normal boy feel about such feelings coming from a girl with the lower body of a spider, I wonder? Would they be happy? Would they feel grossed out? I was perhaps just a deviant from their perspective.

Who cares? I don't give a damn about what other people think anymore.

I loved Gerbera as one of my companions. I had no psychological objections to those emotions developing into feelings of love toward her as a woman. At the very least, her lower half didn't bother me in the least.

Having said that, I already accepted Lily's love. As a normal boy born in modern Japan, it was common sense I should only love one girl. So, I couldn't answer Gerbera's feelings.

I wonder if my thoughts would hit such a dead end with a human girl?

However, I also had to remember I was no longer in modern Japan. This was another world. These girls were my servants and I was their master. They were special to me, and I was just as special to them. I fully realized this after that calamitous night where we faced the incarnation of tyranny.

It didn't need to be said that our type of relationship didn't exist in Japan. My sense of values from back then didn't really apply here, and it was clear that trying to apply them would be somewhat unreasonable. I needed to rethink things from square one regarding my relationship with these girls.

There's also the matter of Gerbera and Rose. I'm getting a headache from all this...

But these matters involved the girls I found dearest to me. I had to give them serious thought. Above all else, I wanted to properly think things over and give them my answers. Having the leisure to worry about such things was actually something to be happy about.

“What’s problematic, My Lord?” Gerbera said, turning around as she marched forward. It seemed she’d heard my muttering.

I smiled awkwardly back at her. I couldn’t honestly tell her I was troubled over how to progress my relationship with her.

“Nothing. I was just thinking of how hard it is to find a new servant.”

I was trying to gloss things over, but this was in fact troubling. Three days had passed since we started exploring the forest together. Though we continued our search in high spirits, we still hadn’t found any new servants.

Our exploration hadn’t been fruitless, however. Gerbera had a monster—one we called a bullet creeper back in the Colony—wrapped up in webs hanging from her plump spider abdomen. These were plant monsters who entwined themselves on trees and fired out seeds like buckshot from a lily-shaped flower. Lily could get stronger by eating it, and Gerbera could also harvest mana, as minuscule as it was, by defeating it. In that, our past three days hadn’t been meaningless.

We were covering a fair bit of ground quite smoothly, but the results were still far and away from what I was hoping for. The reason I wanted to get out and start exploring right away was because I couldn’t stand around doing nothing. But the bigger reason was that our situation had changed significantly. Our battle with Gerbera was quite fierce, but after surmounting it, we managed to gain a powerful new ally.

That night was a major turning point. Our future was incomparably brighter now. Gerbera was one of the strongest monsters in this entire forest. Lily and Rose’s desperate battle against her actually proved there weren’t many monsters who could possibly fight her on even terms.

Not having to fear the threat of normal monsters exponentially raised our freedom of movement. Furthermore, I wanted to target rare monsters and above for my taming ability, and they weren’t threats either. Another high monster could suddenly show up much like Gerbera did, but that wasn’t something we could plan for anyway.

Before, we had no choice but to proceed very carefully, but that wasn’t the case anymore. We could now be a bit more daring in our search for servants. For example, I could search the forest with only Gerbera as my guard, much like we were doing now.

That was why it was quite vexing we weren’t getting the results I’d hoped for. It would be one thing under normal circumstances, but my other goal was to improve the relationship between Gerbera and Rose.

“...Maybe we need to change our approach a little.”

If we weren’t getting any results, we needed to come up with a

new plan. We were putting the time Lily and Rose were out of commission to good use, and our current progress wasn't bad. It wasn't bad, but it was no different from before. We managed to get a new ally in Gerbera, so I wanted to be more efficient about it.

The first idea that came to mind was changing our search area. The biggest reason for our lack of progress was the lack of monsters we were encountering. In three days, we dealt with eight monsters. We were still within range of the exploration team's former hunting grounds, so this wasn't a bad number. However, it was pretty much inevitable we wouldn't find a servant among them. This area was inappropriate for increasing our encounter rate. We needed to go out a little further.

"Is something the matter, My Lord?"

Gerbera looked at me curiously as I sank into silence. I really wanted to get some results so that Rose could start trusting her.

"...Gerbera, there's something I want to try."

Having renewed my determination, I cut right to the chase.



"In short, you would like me to take you further away?"

I sat down to take a break and shared my thoughts with Gerbera. "Well, that's the gist of it. I don't mind if it's somewhere nearby that has more monsters."

"Hmm..." She sank into thought and a crease formed between her slender eyebrows.

"Also, I'd like it to still be a day trip if possible." Rose might object if we didn't make it there and back within a day.

"Let's see... There are several locations around here that should work. For example, how about a lake the local wildlife uses as a water source? I do think it would be an easy place to encounter monsters."

"Ooh. That sounds good." This was the kind of information I was looking for. I was quite excited that I got more than I was hoping for. "Could you tell me about all the other spots you have in mind?"

"Very well. Leave it to me." Her voice was lively, apparently happy that she was being of use.

"All that's left is deciding where to go. Okay, Gerbera, I'd like your advice."

However, she suddenly became timid at my request. "M-Mine?"

"Is it too much trouble?"

"N-No. Not at all!" She waved both her hands in front of her in a panic. "But is there not someone more fitting to provide this manner of advice?"

"You're the only one here."

"That's true, but... I-I mean, wouldn't it be better to return for the

day?"

"Even so..." I scratched my head. "I honestly don't want to burden Lily with too much right now."

"Mm. Burdening the injured is certainly out of the question."

"And I can't really talk to Rose about it. You get it, right?"

"That's true..." Gerbera looked somewhat down. She knew it was likely that Rose would be against this. "...However, I still believe I am unsuitable for this. I'm a woman who simply settled everything with brute force up until now. Thinking things through isn't my specialty."

"I don't think that's the case."

After spending the last few days with her, I didn't believe Gerbera was less intelligent than my other servants. Her heart was simply still young. She was awkward and had terrible luck with meeting others. She definitely wasn't a fool, but it was hard to convince her otherwise.

"There are others you can consult, aren't there? For example... Right, what about that terrifying little girl?"

"Katou?"

Gerbera's impression of Katou was quite harsh. It was strange that my strongest servant was terrified of the girl who possessed the least strength among us, but that was just how much of an impression she'd made that night.

"That little girl is rather impressive. I'm sure she is far more suited to provide you with advice than I."

It was true that Katou's advice would likely be good. She had the talent to back up such expectations. Gerbera's suggestion wasn't fundamentally a bad idea. However, I still shook my head.

"Asking Katou for advice is barking up the wrong tree."

"How so?"

"How, you say...?" I was somewhat bewildered by her response. This would've been enough to convince Lily or Rose. "Katou isn't my servant. She's human."

"So a human won't do?" Gerbera looked more and more confused. It felt like I wasn't getting through to her. "Do you mean she's not a trustworthy companion because she's human? But if I'm not mistaken, she came together with the others to save you, did she not?"

"That's..."

I tried to object, but I was unable to say anything. She was right. Katou was human, but she fought for my sake. She didn't wield a weapon, but she risked her life in her own way for mine. She saved me by doing so.

So... So what? No, stop. Hang on. Wait. Aren't my thoughts going in a weird direction?

I had a bad feeling. I didn't know what was bad about it... but this conversation was becoming inconvenient.

Gerbera didn't notice my consternation and continued. "I completely thought she was also one of your companions. But if that's the case, what exactly is she to you?"

It was a very simple question. She was someone I was protecting. Nothing more and nothing less. It was impossible for her to be anything else. She was a human I had to be wary of. That's what I thought when I first spoke to her. That hadn't changed, even now. So, this was a very simple question... And yet I was unable to answer. I suddenly recalled Katou's reserved smile.

"Thank goodness you're safe, Senpai."

"Being trusted by you, having trust in you, being devoted to you, and receiving your love as their master are all the greatest forms of happiness, after all."

"How about Gerbera?"

"Great. So it's decided."

"..."

There was actually one more thing on my mind about Katou. Ever since that night, my impression of her changed. It was like... the uneasiness I felt when speaking with her wasn't really there anymore. I thought this was because she managed to mentally recover after the battle with Gerbera, but that didn't seem quite right either. She did speak more than before, and as a result, she also smiled more. This certainly was a change, but it wasn't anything dramatic. She was still expressionless and gloomy. Her eyes were glazed over, and her lips only moved ever so slightly when she did smile. It didn't wipe away the dark shadow that hung over her, though.

She didn't change much from before, yet something about her was decisively different. So, wouldn't it be normal to assume that what changed was the way I was looking at her?

On the night I was abducted, Katou exposed herself to danger to save me. That's why I looked at her differently. That's what I thought, at least. In other words, I had misread the girl named Katou Mana.

Thinking back on it, I had been distrustful of her ever since I met her. I was looking at her as if she was definitely going to betray me. Any scenery would look warped when viewed through such a twisted lens. Now I was able to look at her without that sort of bias. That's probably what this was. But what was I supposed to do now that I realized this?

Gerbera asked what Katou was to me. She was someone I was protecting. Nothing more, nothing less. I never bothered to build a proper human relationship with her because of this. However, that was wrong. Wasn't I supposed to at least reciprocate her trust after she risked her own life to save me?

Yes... Trust... A human...

“...”

On the day the Colony was destroyed, I was almost killed by my classmates. Humans were filthy. They were all scum. One could never tell when they were going to turn traitor. That conviction within me still hadn't changed. There was no way such filthy humans would risk their lives to save me. It was unthinkable.

Such was the case, but it felt like Katou, and just Katou, wasn't likely to betray me. My senses were telling me it was alright to trust her. Maybe it was fine to put my trust in her once more.

Perhaps it's too late. But this time, I can trust... I can trust...

“Hrk...?!” I suddenly started running away.

“My Lord?!”

I heard Gerbera panicking behind me, but I didn't pay her any mind. I leaned against a nearby tree and vomited. In my mind, I could vividly see countless eyes looking down on me.

Everything from that day came back to me.

The pain. The suffering. The grief. My trampled heart.

Getting punched, kicked, and stomped on.

The strange noises coming from my ribs.

Ow. Ow. It hurts. I'm scared.

When I opened my eyes, I was met with lifeless gazes. Corpses. People I knew who went through the same suffering I did but were already dead. And the ones who killed them were also people I knew.

I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

Those words repeated in my head endlessly. I looked up and saw a row of insane smiles looking back down at me.

“Guh... Hak...”

“A-Are you alright, My Lord?!”

Gerbera came up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders. I could feel her heart flowing in me through our mental path. I could feel her concern for me. I could feel her confusion as to what she should do. And... I could feel her sorrow. These were all feelings she, as a servant, had for her master.

“...Huh?” With that, I finally realized this wasn't the Colony. The self-awareness of what exactly I was right now served as a link bringing my psyche back to the real world. “Ger...bera?”

“My Lord! Can you hear me?!”

My vision was blurry. Tears were streaming down my cheeks. It would've helped to have my back stroked, but Gerbera didn't seem to know what to do, seeing that she was a monster. She sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

“D-Did I say something bad...?”

“There's no way you... Hrk?!” I tried to comfort her, but I vomited once more.

“A-Aah... My Lord!”

“I-I’m okay... Calm down a little.”

I regained my composure little by little. Seeing Gerbera in such a panic revived my awareness of being her master; it worked like a tranquilizer for me. I spat out the vomit still in my mouth. My lips were still trembling, but I was at least able to speak a little more at ease like this.

“I’m just a little tired. It’s nothing serious.”

“Really? You’re white as a sheet.”

“I’m fine. It’ll go away with a little rest. You might not get it, but humans are delicate creatures.” I was trying to gloss things over, but the second half wasn’t really a joke.

Goddammit. How pathetic...

“...Sorry, could you bring me my flask? My mouth feels gross.”

My wooden flask was lying on the ground where we were taking a break. I wasn’t sure I could even walk in my current state.

“R-Right. Just wait a moment.”

Gerbera rushed over to the flask like a jet. As I watched her, I glimpsed into the deep cavity within my heart and was left completely astonished. I didn’t think I was this abnormal. My distrust toward humanity was apparently something that had taken root at a very physiological level. The fact that I didn’t even realize this before just showed how serious my symptoms were.

The term PTSD came to mind. It was a form of mental disorder that could be caused by a deep wound to the heart triggered by a disastrous experience which brought one close to death. Human hearts were ever so brittle, so when they were faced with the ultimate form of fear, their own death, the heart would collapse far too easily. It was said it could also occur from an incident which made one lose their dignity as a person.

People who suffered from PTSD took evasive actions against anything related to the source of their trauma. They would have flashbacks of what happened and fall into a panic, and they would end up in poor physical health.

In my case, it was pretty simple. The source of my trauma was being betrayed by my classmates and nearly getting killed. This was the first time I panicked from a flashback, and it really was the worst feeling.

I managed to recover because Gerbera was nearby, but if she wasn’t, it was possible I would’ve fainted on the spot. I was now self-aware of a problem within my own mind.

And also, I had to acknowledge one other truth. I was unable to trust Katou from the bottom of my heart. For example, I was likely incapable of giving her a weapon. I couldn’t entrust her with my

safety. It wasn't a problem of whether or not I needed to do so. That was just what it meant to trust someone. The fact I was incapable of doing so was a pretty big problem in and of itself.

"My Lord! I brought your water!"

"...Thanks."

I took the flask from Gerbera and rinsed out my mouth. I managed to calm down, but I still didn't have the strength to stand up straight. I took some unsteady steps away from the tree I vomited on and sat on the ground.

What came to mind as I did were Katou's "eyes." That gaze when we first met which would show up every now and then. There was a bottomless tenacity to them... No, that wasn't quite right. As I was now, I saw something else in those eyes. They were eyes that did nothing more than look at me earnestly as a human.

Up until now, I always wondered what was going through her mind. I doubted her. However, after opening the lid and taking a look inside, that seemed completely foolish. Her intentions were blindingly clear.

Katou had nobody else she could rely on in this world other than me. It was obvious she'd want to rely on me. There was a calculating aspect to that, but having experienced something so cruel it couldn't even be expressed in words, it was actually her sentimental side which wanted to rely on others.

It was so simple, yet I couldn't understand her feelings at the time. And because I couldn't understand them, I ended up finding her attitude eerie. More precisely... I was fixated on the idea that she was definitely scheming something.

As a result, I was unable to give her what she wanted. That was true for the future as well. I now knew both my body and mind rejected her as a human. I was far too insincere after having saved her life.

Above all else, the girl known as Katou Mana was pitiful. I could imagine her loneliness. Her feelings were perfectly clear to me after having gone through it myself. But still, I couldn't do anything about it.

"If you'd like someone to trust you, then you'll have to build a reputation to deserve it. What a load of hypocritical bullshit..."

"My Lord?"

Those were the words I told Gerbera just a few days ago. And now they were stabbing me right back in the heart. It was beyond hypocrisy. Those were words I couldn't ever say. I mean, Katou even risked her life to save me, but she still couldn't gain my trust.

"My Lord..."

Gerbera fidgeted about for a while. She surely had no idea what to

do at times like this. That was inevitable. I had no idea what to do myself. She eventually took a seat next to me. As she did, her folded legs settled down near me. Lured in by them, I leaned against her leg. It was the leg of a spider, but I didn't find it unpleasant in the least. The feeling of her white hair was actually comfortable.

"Sorry, My Lord."

"Hm?"

"This happened because of my careless statement, did it not?"

I really couldn't deceive her, considering my sorry state. Gerbera looked like she was feeling guilty. A shadow was hanging over her.

"I don't understand what you're feeling. I also don't understand what there is between yourself and Katou. I was surely too late in meeting you..."

All of my servants were influenced by my heart through the process of gaining an ego. However, Gerbera didn't share my animosity toward humans. She became my servant after the scars on my heart had healed somewhat. I was now faced with the deep scars that had yet to mend. Gerbera couldn't do anything about them. Moreover, she inadvertently touched upon them. That was true. However, I shook my head.

"...Don't apologize. I should actually be thanking you."

"Huh...?"

"I mean, if you weren't here, I wouldn't have noticed my own misunderstanding."

This likely wouldn't have happened with Lily or Rose. They understood the feelings I held toward humans and were just that much more careful about taking it into consideration. But Gerbera absolutely wasn't intent on ruining my mood. And I'm sure this was nothing more than a failure in her eyes. However, her failure had value.

"Sorry, can you let me stay like this for a bit?" I asked.

Gerbera looked at me with a somewhat imprudent expression and nodded repeatedly.

"Thanks."

I closed my eyes and sank deep into thought. I had misread Katou. As a result, I ended up isolating her. And yet, she fought with her life on the line for my sake. As such, I had to respond to her goodwill.

Now then, was I actually capable of surmounting the wounds to my heart and doing something for her in return? It would surely take time. It was perhaps impossible. But even so, I had to put in the effort. I believed this to be a responsibility I had to fulfill.

I wonder what she's doing right now...?

And as that thought passed through my mind, the pain in my heart refused to subside.

Chapter 4: The Puppet's Aspiration

~Rose's POV~

Creation was practically the very meaning of my life. I had my beloved knife in hand, as always, and began carving away at a moderately sized log. All magical puppets possessed this type of magic knife, and all were capable of using it to manipulate wood to their will.

Having said that, the skill of the crafter was obviously important. A common magical puppet wouldn't create anything more than what they required. However, I was creating new tools every day at my master's request. Because of that, I could clearly tell my skills had improved.

I wanted to be able to create even better tools. By doing so, I could be more useful to my master. As such, the time I spent carving away at wood was a moment of bliss. I could really feel I was being useful. I could feel I was alive. Despite being nothing more than a puppet who didn't even have blood running through my body, I was able to make such an outrageous claim.



After I was given the name Rose, I had two moments I considered my birth. The first was my origin as a monster called a magical puppet. My mother specimen gradually gathered mana by wandering around this vast forest and carved copies of herself using the excess. One such copy was me.

The second was obviously the day I met my master. In that instant, I gained a personality and became Rose. I was no longer a nameless magical puppet. Ever since then, I cherished my given duty of creating many weapons, armor, and tools for my master.

Sometimes I would make armaments enhanced with magic, and other times I would prepare simple furniture or tools needed for his livelihood. Right now, I was in the arachne nest creating replacements for all the armaments we had lost the other day.

“...”

There was a pair of eyes staring attentively at my work. It wasn't my master. He was in the middle of exploring the forest... Completely pushing aside my objections.

No, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter right now...

I shifted my focus to the gaze before me.

“...Is it enjoyable to watch me?”

“Yes,” Katou replied, wrapped up in her sheets and smiling faintly. “It’s quite interesting, and mysterious.” She picked up a shield I’d created. It was a round, black shield with a smooth surface. “It’s made of simple wood, but after it’s done, it doesn’t look like anything other than metal.” She ran her nails across the black surface of the shield, and a jarring sound rang out.

Lately, all of my creations had this blackish tint to them. It wasn’t just an outward change in appearance. They were more solid and tenacious in nature too. It was pretty much unrecognizable from the wood it was made from.



But how was it mysterious? Everything I made had magic cast on it. It was the trait of all magical puppets. There wasn't a single mysterious thing about it. I couldn't understand what Katou was talking about.

"Mysterious, you say?"

"Yes... Huh? Is it not mysterious to you?" Katou made a somewhat complex expression as I shook my head. "I see. I guess you haven't learned anything about the concept of atomic theory... Now that I think of it, Mizushima-senpai once told me that even back on Earth, they believed swallows or something would turn into clams or whatnot if they dove into the sea, or something like that," she muttered to herself.

The scene of me silently carving away at wood as I spoke with Katou had become quite common lately here in the arachne nest. Incidentally, Lily was resting a short distance away from us so she could recuperate. She wasn't able to participate in any conversation. It was about time for her to be able to move again, but our master gave her a strict order to rest until she was fully recovered. He really was a worrywart in this respect. In any case, that's how I ended up being the one who Katou talked to most of the time.

"Creating magic tools..." Katou ran the pad of her finger down the surface of the black shield. "It might be completely normal for you, but for me, it's amazing. Magic really is wonderful."

"I'm using mana, but this isn't actually magic."

"So, if it's not magic, then it's your skills. You're capable of making so many things, regardless."

"Thank you."

"I'm sure Senpai feels the same."

I reflexively looked up and saw Katou gazing at me with a faint smile. She seemed to know full well what it was which made me happiest.

"Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help," she added.

As I wondered about the extent to which she knew of my inner thoughts, I pointed at the shield I had just been making. "Then please carry this off to the disposal pile."

"Huh? You're throwing this one away too?"

"Yes. I was caught up in idle thoughts at the time." I handed the nearly finished shield over to her.

She looked somewhat dejected as she took it from my hands. "Am I maybe getting in the way?"

"No. It's something else."

"Okay... I've thought this for a while now, but you scrap quite a

lot of your work, don't you?"

Katou glanced over at the small mountain of wood in the distance. They were all failures I made and threw away over the last few days. Even though we had plenty of material to work with all around us, it was a bit of a waste of time. However, I had no intention of compromising quality.

"Everybody's lives depend on the equipment I make. I can only present something I'm satisfied with beyond a certain extent."

"Oh, I see. You're an artisan, aren't you?" Katou said in an agreeable tone before carrying away my failed work.

During that time, I picked out a new block of wood and went back to carving. Trees were living beings. They all had their own peculiarities. One had to have a proper grasp of those peculiarities to create something from one. This wasn't any different when creating something using mana. By touching the wood and observing it, I could naturally tell what shape would be optimal. I began by carving its general shape first. The final image I had for it was largely within my head at this point. All that was left was to steadily bring it to completion.

Katou returned while I was in the middle of working and once more took a seat in front of me. She pulled her sheets around her shoulders and narrowed her gaze. From what I heard during our idle chatter from the previous day, wrapping herself up like that gave her a sense of security. Though, I couldn't really understand her allusion to a baby calming down by holding onto their own blanket, seeing as how I was never a baby myself.

Wrapped up in her sheets as always, Katou suddenly began talking again. "About the idle thoughts that caused you to mess up... Were they about Gerbera?"

A snap resounded through the air as the wooden block in my hand split in two.

"..."

For a moment, I sat there in a daze, but Katou brought me back to my senses when she bowed to me apologetically.

"Sorry. This time I really did get in your way."

"...Don't be."

Katou was the cause, but the mistake was mine. I shook my head and set aside the now useless block. I then took a new one in hand and began carving once more.

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"Sorry. I overheard you talking with Majima-senpai about it."

She was likely referring to our conversation three days ago, when I brought up my suspicions of Gerbera with my master. There wasn't much meaning in trying to hide it now if she overheard us.

“It’s just as you say.”

The idle thoughts getting in the way of my work were related to Gerbera. I just couldn’t come to like her. My master forgave her and took her in as his servant. As such, I should’ve also accepted her. I knew that much. However, my emotions refused to comply.

I’m my master’s shield.

I wanted to shoulder all the calamities that would befall him with this fabricated body of mine. I didn’t mind in the least if my body was completely ruined in the process. That night when I was unable to protect him remained an extremely bitter memory for me. I felt despair when I was unable to accomplish anything, kicked to the side as my master was stolen from me. And I felt indignation when I arrived at the arachne nest and saw my master injured.

Both of these feelings still burned within me unpleasantly. It made it just that much harder for me to forgive her. Furthermore, I couldn’t understand the reason for Gerbera’s violence, which made it near impossible to repair our relationship.

Gerbera’s rampage was motivated by her nature as a spider. She wanted our master to herself. The feeling of wanting to monopolize something precious was probably something everyone possessed. But nothing of the sort existed within me. It was no longer just a problem of which way was better or worse. We were fundamentally different in nature, so I was unable to understand her. It was difficult to forgive someone I couldn’t understand. That was the fatal flaw in our relationship.

I wanted to accept her, seeing that my master forgave her... I possessed such feelings, yet I couldn’t help but feel hindered by my lack of understanding. I felt like I couldn’t forgive her even though I knew my master wished for me to.

“...Although, it’s embarrassing to admit.” I was opposing my master’s will. It was a disgraceful thing to do as his servant.

But Katou shook her head. “I don’t think you need to feel embarrassed about it. Rose, I feel like you’re killing off your emotions just a bit too much.”

“Killing... my emotions?”

“I understand you wanting to treat Majima-senpai as your number one priority. This is a virtue of yours. However, if you take it too far, you’ll end up losing yourself.”

“Is that a bad thing?” I didn’t understand what she was getting at. “My master decided to accept Gerbera; he forgave her. As such, I should work to accomplish his desire. I exist to fulfill his wishes. My will doesn’t matter in that sense, does it?”

“That’s what you think, but you know...” Katou smiled ever so slightly. “That’s exactly what I mean by killing your emotions. Do you

really think Senpai would be happy about that?"

"That's..."

I was at a loss for words. It was difficult to deny what she was saying. Our master treated his servants dearly. As such, it even seemed like he thought of us as more important than himself.

"So, what do you think I should do about this matter with Gerbera?" I asked. The situation was too much for me to handle on my own.

It wasn't a bad thing to talk to Katou like this. The image of her picking a fight that evening without even a single knife in her hand was burned into my mind. Furthermore, as mere monsters, our knowledge regarding matters of the heart could never compare to hers. Perhaps she knew a way to break this stalemate I found myself in. That's just how much I could expect from the girl known as Katou Mana.

"...Isn't it fine to forgive her only when you think you can actually forgive her?" Katou paused for a short moment but then continued. "You can't kill your own heart. Majima-senpai wouldn't wish for that. Also, I'm sure it'll twist you in some way."

"Twist me?"

"For example, you could push down and suppress your feelings regarding Gerbera, but you could also view that as stealing her chance to atone, right? In that case, you'll never be able to accept her."

"So that manner of perspective also exists..."

Katou's opinion was of great interest to me. Before I knew it, my hands had come to a complete stop and I was facing her earnestly. Our conversation simply held that much value to me.

"Other than that, it depends on both of your efforts, I guess. As for Gerbera... I'm sure Senpai will handle that side of things, one way or the other."

Katou looked off into the distance. Her eyes were gloomy, yet her gaze was steady. The world she saw was evidently different from mine.

"Rose, you want to be able to accept Gerbera, right?"

"Yes, of course. But I just can't forgive her."

"Is that so...? I guess that makes sense. I mean, you don't have any desires of your own, after all."

"Desires... is it?"

"Maybe it sounds bad put like that." Katou lightly laughed. "But Majima-senpai wants those who love him at his side, right? You also understand he wishes to love them and sincerely answer their feelings, right? That's desire, in a sense. It very much suits him."

"Desires..."

"If you're finding it difficult to accept like that, then you can also

consider it a wish. The two words only differ slightly in terms of rhetoric. The important thing here is that it's a human-like quality. This also applies to Lily and Gerbera."

Was it like Lily's wish to be loved by our master? Or like Gerbera's wish to be accepted by her fellow servants?

"It's like your desires are too biased, Rose. There are multiple forms of desires, like 'something I want to do,' 'something I want done for me,' or 'something I want to do for another.' But to me, it looks like your desires are extremely slanted to that last one."

"Does that mean my personality is defective?"

"That's not the case," Katou said in a strong tone. "It's biased simply because your personality is still underdeveloped. Even if it's wrong, it's not defective."

"How can you say that so clearly...?"

"I can. Quite definitively. I mean, it hasn't even been a month since you gained a heart, right? It's entirely natural for it to be underdeveloped."

I was completely caught off guard by her statement. It was exactly as she said. I had two moments of birth. One was when I was created, and the other was when the individual known as Rose was born. However, there was no mistaking that the second one held far more meaning to me. No matter how much time I accumulated as a soulless puppet, it was like nothing more than a stack of flimsy paper. Compared to that, a life of having a master to serve and be of use to was indescribably vivid.

As a magical puppet, I was never a baby. However, emotionally I was nothing more than a newborn babe. My feelings were still undeveloped and immature. I was far behind Lily, who had Mizushima Miho's memories, and even Gerbera. I wanted to exist for my master's sake. I wanted to work for his sake. I wanted to do anything and everything I could for him. That's just how large an existence he was to me.

But that's what it meant for my heart to be underdeveloped. I was unable to understand my master's desire to do something for Gerbera. I once lamented at the fact I couldn't understand the subtleties of the human heart when my master felt depressed over killing his former classmate. Perhaps that could also be attributed to this.

"But do I even possess such desires to begin with?" If that was an expression of "human-like qualities," then it wouldn't be all that strange for me to lack such emotions as a puppet.

However, Katou shook her head. "You do. Senpai doesn't wish to have a convenient puppet by his side, right? I'm sure he wants someone with a firm personality. That's precisely why the relationship between you and Gerbera has gotten so complicated. So, there's no

way you don't have any desires of your own."

"But I truly can't think of anything."

Katou looked like she was deep in thought, perhaps having understood how perplexed I was over this. And after thinking it over for a while, the crease between her brows vanished.

"Rose, has anything ever made you feel really happy?"

"Happy?" I cocked my head curiously.

"Yes. Couldn't you say that your desire is to once more experience that sense of happiness?"

"I see." I pondered over her easy-to-understand hint. Exhausting myself for my master like I was now was happiness to me, but...

"I mean anything except for working for Senpai's sake and being useful to him, okay?"

She ended up cutting me off before I spoke. Well, I could understand what she was getting at. The desire I was looking for had to be "something I wanted" or "something I wanted done for me." By discovering such an unknown facet to myself, I would surely be able to mature.

Happiness... Happiness...

"..."

Something suddenly came to mind as I repeated that word to myself.

But that much happiness was actually frightening...

"Rose? Did you think of something?"

"Oh, no. Umm... I thought of something different."

Katou noticed my slight movements and questioned me, but I denied her on the spot. I was basically straight-up lying. Having said that, this was inevitable. "That" was out of the question. No matter what, "that" couldn't be allowed.

She did in fact ask about what happiness I had experienced in my short life. "That" was a perfect example. It was my happiest memory and completely complied with the conditions she listed... But it could never happen again. It wasn't even that I was aiming too high. This was insolence. I couldn't possibly wish for it. I wasn't allowed to desire it. I was just a puppet.

"Rose, you're lying, aren't you?" Katou realized I wasn't telling the truth. My shoddy lies were entirely transparent to her. "You're actually seriously considering what you just imagined, right?"

She had a merciless side to her that she once displayed when she cornered Lily. There was just one difference. That night she did it for my master's sake. Today she was doing it for mine.

She probably saw through me completely with her sharp sensibilities. Meaning this was a rite of passage I had to go through to be able to grow up.

“I... I...”

Her confident attitude was pushing me to answer. However, there was another deciding factor. I became self-aware of my own wish. I couldn't return to when I didn't know about it. I abided by the desire I awakened to. I took the slightest glimpse of it in my mind. That was the deciding factor.

“I want...”

I resolutely mustered my courage.

“I want my master to...”

I tried putting my desire into words.

“I want my master to... hug... me...”

And just as I thought, I immediately regretted saying it.

I want my master to hug me? What's with that? What am I thinking? There are things that should and shouldn't be said.

There was that one time my master hugged me. It was the evening he killed his despicable former classmate. He hugged me, I hugged him back, and he fell asleep nestled up against me for the entire night.

I didn't require sleep, so that was like an all-night dream to me. But it was of course an extreme exception. I was fully aware of this. A dream was nothing more than a dream. Seriously wishing for one was utter foolishness.

Know your place. You're just a puppet...

But even as I rebuked myself, I couldn't lie to my own heart. What was going on? I seriously desired to be hugged by my master.

“...Oh my gosh! Rose! You're so cute!”

I was suddenly hugged from the front. By Katou. I froze, but after coming back to my senses, I timidly pushed her shoulders back.

“I'm sorry, Katou. Please give me some space.”

“Oh, sorry. I just got caught up in the moment.”

Katou jolted back, looking awkward and sad. It felt like she was somewhat like Lily in this regard... But I immediately realized this wasn't the case. She was probably similar to Mizushima Miho, who my sister was mimicking. Meaning this was presumably what the girl known as Katou Mana was originally like.

“The one you want hugging you isn't me. It's Majima-senpai, right?”

“Um, yes, er, no, but...”

“What is it?” Katou asked with a blank look.

“...Is it not far too presumptuous for a puppet like me to want such a thing?” I timidly replied.

“I don't think so.” Her tone was somewhat reproachful. “Are you just giving up then?”

“But... I cannot possibly trouble my master with such self-indulgence...”

“I’m sure Majima-senpai would be delighted to hear of your self-indulgence.”

“Really?”

“At least from what I’ve seen, Senpai is the type to feel sorry if all you do is devote yourself to him.”

That’s entirely possible...

It was perfectly obvious for me to devote myself to my master, but there were times he didn’t seem to like that. In which case, my desire was something great for my master.

No, but, I can’t. I can’t. This is the whispering of a devil.

“You can’t give up,” Katou said. Her tone was more like the affection and support of a mother than the whispering of a devil. “You don’t want to trouble him. In that case, it’s all fine if he’s the one who wants to hug you and does so, right?”

“So you say, but is that not impossible?” This was pretty much exactly what happened that evening, but I didn’t think there would ever be a second time.

“I’m telling you not to give up.” She tightly gripped my hand. Her fingers were dainty and frail. “You need to put in the effort to realize your dreams. Yours is one which can be fulfilled, after all.”

“What are you saying I should do?”

“It’s simple.” Katou stared right at my face. “If you’d like Majima-senpai to hug you, then you just have to get cuter.”

“Me...? Cuter...?”

“That’s right. Fortunately, you’re skilled at making tools. You should be able to use your own magic to make yourself cuter without the help of a witch, a mother’s memento, or a special stage.”

Katou’s suggestion wasn’t impossible. As a magical puppet, creating things with my magic knife was practically the very meaning of my life. As such, I could recreate my very own existence. However, it wasn’t just a matter of whether or not it was possible.

“But would such behavior be tolerated for a mere puppet like me?”

“It’s obviously okay,” she said in the strongest tone she’d used all day. “Are you listening? It’s totally natural for a girl to try and make herself cuter when she wants a boy to hug her. Things like makeup and self-improvement are precious to girls. Senpai doesn’t have the right to criticize that.”

“But I’m a puppet...”

“What are you saying? Think it over. Of course a master would want to hug his cute little puppet when she dresses up, right? Regardless of whether you’re a girl or a puppet, Senpai doesn’t have a single reason to stop you from prettifying yourself up for his sake. I mean, you are a girl puppet.”

I hesitated in the face of Katou's earnest gaze. She kept telling me I couldn't give up. A part of me criticized whether such a thing was allowed as a servant. My rationality told me it was meaningless. Anything and everything which bound me hand and foot was placed on a scale opposite to my desire. So, which way would the scales tip?

As I stared at those scales waiting for the result... I suddenly realized I was doing something extremely foolish. The very fact I was weighing them out made it clear how much weight my desire had to me.

It wasn't a matter of logic. This feeling was irrational and unreasonable. But now it made sense. This was what it meant to "want something." I felt like I finally understood a fragment of what the human heart was.

"So, say I did my best to dress myself up..." I asked for confirmation once more. Thinking back on it, this was because I wanted one more push. "...Do you think my master would be pleased?"

"I'm sure he will."

Katou blessed my determination with a reserved smile. There was no falsehood in her words. They were filled with affection and encouragement. I could clearly perceive that now. I was truly grateful. If not for her, the lock to my heart where this desire was stored away would surely have rusted from neglect. I would've eventually died without ever realizing something important was dear to me.

As I was now, I felt like I could one day forgive Gerbera. What she had done upset me greatly, but even so, the feeling I had which made her motives a complete mystery to me and made me feel like disregarding her was growing fainter. It was impossible right now, but one day, in the not too distant future...

"I'll help make you cuter, of course. I'll do everything I can to support you."

"Thank you very much."

I felt genuine gratitude toward this girl, gratitude which surpassed the barrier between servants and humans.

"Katou, are you..." That's precisely why a certain doubt came to mind. "...Are you not angry with us?"

"Angry?" Katou stared at me in wonder. "Me? With you? Why would I be?"

"We were always wary of you even though our master decided to protect you. We saw you as an enemy from within. You were well aware of this, weren't you?"

"Yes, well, Lily did say it right to my face before."

About to jump into a life or death struggle against Gerbera, Lily confronted Katou directly about the suspicions she had harbored. And

yet Katou didn't seem to mind at all. Her tone was so casual it was like this was just a regular occurrence to her.

"Besides, I said so back then as well. I already suspected it to be the case beforehand."

"So, shouldn't you be angry with me? At the very least, that man called Kaga was furious with our master before he was killed." The sight of my master talking with the only other human I had ever seen him speaking with other than Katou came to mind. My recollection of his face was rather faint by now, though.

A deep crease formed between Katou's brows. "Lumping me together with him... really is somewhat unpleasant."

"Pardon me," I said as I lowered my head. "However, it might not be entirely off the mark. People would usually dislike having things hidden from them, wouldn't they? It wouldn't be all that strange for you to bear animosity toward us for doing so."

I was unable to ignore my doubts after she had helped me so much. Katou was setting aside her spare time like this just to help me resolve my troubles.

"I guess so. From my point of view, it's pretty much inevitable you would suspect me of something, but I suppose that does feel somewhat unpleasant," Katou said with a nod.

"Then..."

"But I'm not really angry."

This was baffling to me. Katou didn't really feel discomfort over something which was normally grounds for being angry.

Seeing me struggle to understand, Katou cocked her head in thought. "Hmm... How to put it?" She picked up the completed shield she was looking at earlier and held it to her chest. She pressed her folded fingers to her lips and huddled up inside her sheets. "To put it simply, I sympathize with you servants."

"Sympathy... is it? Toward us and not our master?"

"Yes. With you servants."

I could understand Katou's point, barring one thing. Because she sympathized with us, she understood our position and wasn't angry. That much I knew. However, I couldn't understand why she did. We were our master's servants. Our very purpose for existing was to serve him. This didn't change even now that I was aware of my hidden desire. It was a fundamental truth to my being. So, why would a human like Katou sympathize with us?

"Besides, I'm grateful to you, Rose. I mean, you'll talk to me normally without suspecting me of anything. You're the only one around here who does."

"You can tell?" I asked in a surprised tone.

Katou gave a strained smile. "You're here speaking with me now,

and even on that night, you planned on bringing me along from the very beginning, right? I know you have an honest personality. You're not the type to express yourself without words, so any insincerity would show on your face right away."

"My face is completely featureless, though."

"It is. That part was a joke."

"..."

I didn't know how serious she was being, but it was true I was easy to read. I was self-aware of this, and I was likely the most guilty of this among our group, including my master. It sounded nice to be called serious and honest, but it was perhaps more correct to refer to me as tactlessly frank and accommodating. Gerbera's case was a perfect example of this.

Even if I did suspect Katou of something, she would definitely catch on to it right away. That's why it was just as she said. I didn't suspect Katou like my master or Lily did. I didn't believe she would betray us. I didn't wonder what she was plotting. In fact, it would be more accurate to say I didn't understand why they suspected her in the first place.

Honestly speaking, I had a poor impression of the beings known as humans, the ones who caused my master to go through so much pain. I didn't really like Katou when we first met. However, as I spent more time with her, that gradually began to change.

I was different from Lily in this regard. As the one who ensured the safety of my master, who possessed no strength in combat, I had a certain level of affinity with Katou, seeing that she also possessed no strength. Unlike Lily, I also lacked Mizushima Miho's memories, so a large portion of my life since gaining an ego was spent with Katou.

That was why I didn't hesitate to bring her along when Gerbera attacked us. Moreover, she risked her own life to save my master. That was the reason I doubted Gerbera, another servant, but didn't doubt Katou. There was no reason to suspect her of anything after all this time.

Rather, not that I wanted to think this or even say it aloud, but my master's distrust of Katou was actually rather strange to me. Or perhaps abnormal. Having said that, the reason my master ended up like that was perfectly clear, even to a puppet like me.

He had deep scars carved into his heart. Even now, they continued to torment him. He wouldn't be able to fully accept Katou until those wounds healed. And he couldn't do anything about that himself.

"I'm truly grateful you believe in me, Rose. I'd like you to be my friend, if possible."

Katou's isolated circumstances had been on my mind for quite a while. That's why I was surprised yet could still comprehend her

statement.

“Your friend?”

“So, it’s no good?”

I was indebted to this girl, both with regard to my master and myself. One had to repay their debts. However, I was a servant and she was a human. Our social standings were different. Our sense of values were different. Our races were different. Everything about us was hopelessly different. It would be impossible for us to be friends. But... Was that even important here?

“I guess not...” Katou said with a faint smile.

Her smile was merely for form’s sake, as if to say it was a joke. Seeing such a fleeting expression on her face, I felt my chest tightening. An incomprehensible emotion rampaged within me.

Up until now, I would’ve suppressed such impulsive feelings as something unnecessary. But now, I knew what this was. I learned about it just moments ago. She just taught me. I properly understood this was something important. I pushed the impulse in my chest back, and before I knew it, I began addressing her as she smiled meekly.

“If my master were to order it, I would point my blade at you.”

“What?”

Katou’s eyes shot open. She was absolutely shocked. Even I was surprised by what I was saying. But after a short pause, Katou cocked her head curiously.

“Why are you suddenly stating the obvious?”

So, she found this obvious. And yet she still wanted to be my friend. I couldn’t even begin to guess why she would say that. I couldn’t unravel even a fragment of the inner thoughts of this girl known as Katou Mana. But there was one thing I knew quite clearly.

She was being serious. In which case, I had to answer her sincerely. Fortunately, she was the one who taught me about the feeling of “wanting to do something.” It wasn’t logic that determined what had to be done here. I was pushed by my impulse to do what I wanted.

“If you’re fine with that...”

“Yes?”

“Then I’d also... like to be your friend.”

Katou looked shocked. Her eyes shook as if she had no idea what I just said. Her somewhat childish face gradually showed understanding as she stared at me.

“Th—” Just for an instant, it looked like she was going to cry, but she shook it off with wondrous willpower. “Thank you, Rose.”



Her lips curved into a grand smile as if she was no longer able to endure it. Just that was enough to convince me that my choice wasn't wrong.

"So... Best regards, Rose."

Katou held out her hand to me. It was similar to when we decided to combine forces against Gerbera, yet it was clearly different.

"But I guess it's a little late for this, huh?"

"No. I'm sure this is necessary." I put down my knife and gripped Katou's hand. "I'll be in your care, Katou."

And that was how things went on the day I became friends with Katou Mana.

Chapter 5: Dark Omens

“Graaawr!”

A gray wolf, a firefang, ran through the dense forest as it howled wildly. It weaved its way through the overgrown trees, trampled down bushes, and circled around to our rear at a speed I couldn't follow. However, that wasn't enough to surpass the mobility of the white spider with me.

“Grrrr...?!”

The firefang growled in shock. A white shadow, which was by my side just a moment ago, now blocked its path.

“You shan't pass,” the white spider said as she grinned at the wolf. “Hmph.”

“Gya?!”

The white spider, Gerbera, punched the firefang on the snout with her bare hand. She just casually flung out her fist, but it had more than enough power behind it to be deadly. Smashed fangs flew into the air as the two-meter-tall wolf was sent flying in the opposite direction. The impact looked like it was enough to break the wolf's neck, but as expected of a monster, the firefang got back to its feet with a bloody nose.

“Grrr...! Grawr!”

It growled to keep us back, but then it decided it was at a disadvantage and bolted away.

We weren't going to let it get away, of course.

“My Lord!”

Gerbera swiftly returned to my side and took the large shield from my hands, stowed it away, and then picked me up in her slender arms. She was completely fluid. Every action she took in combat was shrewd, no wasted movements. It was captivating. She truly shined on the field of battle like the blessed child of the god of war. If pushed to say it, her usual regretful behavior seemed like a lie. That in itself was adorable, though.

“Please be careful not to bite your tongue.”

“It would've been nice if you had told me that when we first met.”

“...Didn't you promise not to mention that?”

Gerbera looked displeased with my lousy joke, but I wanted to be forgiven for at least this much. She was carrying me like a princess, after all. It was so pathetic. I felt like crying, but due to my deficiency

in movement speed, I had no choice but to accept my fate. I did tell her she may as well carry me over her shoulder like a sack, but she rejected my proposal because it was too dangerous running through the forest like that.

“Here we go,” she said as she began running like a loosed arrow.
“Uooh?!”

We accelerated quickly as the trees of the forest streamed behind us at an unbelievable speed. It wasn't all that different from a car back in modern Japan, but I couldn't forget we were in a densely packed forest. If I was capable of going this speed on my own, I would absolutely have crashed into a tree within just a few steps. Her reflexes were incredible. Not only that, Gerbera was being careful not to shake me about as much as she could. If I were slung over her shoulder, she wouldn't have been able to have such a firm hold of me.

My eyes were gradually getting accustomed to the speed. I could see the firefang we were chasing. It was also running through the forest at a terrifying pace. But Gerbera was capable of going far faster. That was precisely why she could maintain a fixed distance behind it. If we were the ones being chased, the firefang certainly wouldn't be able to do the same.

The wolf noticed it couldn't get away and came to a stop. It turned toward us as we also stopped, and then it took a deep breath.

“Awooooo!”

I couldn't tell whether it was steeling itself for battle or screaming in despair. But several seconds later, I heard other wolves howling in response. Wolves typically formed packs. The firefangs near the Colony were simply “strays” who had escaped the exploration team's hunts. The one we encountered today just happened to be on its own, but we anticipated it would call for help when cornered. In other words...

“...Looks like the mission is a success,” I muttered quietly.

“Mm.” Gerbera nodded. “Looks like about five or six of them.”

Wolves came leaping out to our left and right just as she finished speaking.

“Graaawr!”

The firefang's strongest attack, the flames it could shoot from its mouth, bathed the forest in red. The moment before they completely enveloped us, Gerbera leapt straight up and took refuge at the top of a tree.

“Ugh...!”

The rustling branches brushing against my skin hurt, but I bit down and endured the pain. Gerbera immediately jumped to another tree, and a moment later, multiple flames slammed into the spot she was just occupying and lit the tree like a torch.

“Unfortunately, none of them seem to be an ally,” Gerbera commented.

I looked down and spotted six growling firefangs beneath us. I couldn’t sense any of them through my mental path.

“Looks like it.”

“Very well. Then there is no need to hesitate.”

Gerbera smiled boldly and unleashed threads from her hand. Half the firefangs dodged, but the rest were caught in her web. She easily fished up three wolves then drove them back into the ground head first.

“Shall we finish this?”

It didn’t take long for her to exterminate the firefangs.



There was no way we were going to carry six whole firefangs back with us, so we had to deal with them here. We carved them into their edible and inedible portions and tried skinning them on our own. We didn’t do a very good job. This type of work had always been left to Rose, so we were made fully aware of her value now that she wasn’t with us.

After leaving the disassembly site behind, I once more struck up a conversation with Gerbera.

“...Now then. We’ve changed our search area, and so far, it’s looking pretty good.”

“Indeed. But we have yet to find another servant.”

“Not much we can do about that. We did at least manage to match our encounters over the last three days in just half a day here.”

We had come over to the lake Gerbera mentioned. There were far more monsters here. Just today, we found three different monsters, the last being the firefang we just fought. It was much more efficient to look for packs of monsters so we could encounter as many as possible. With Gerbera’s abilities, it was no trouble to kick them about. It would’ve been faster to bump into a pack, but depending on the circumstances, we would find monsters acting independently like we just did. That’s where I came up with a certain plan.

Monsters didn’t possess a clear will of their own, but they at least possessed intelligence which matched wild animals back on Earth. As such, if we merely waited for them to call their allies, we could carry out our exploration all the more efficiently. And that was exactly what we did with the firefangs just now. The plan worked out perfectly, so in just a few hours, we’d managed to find eight monsters.

“It’ll start getting dark soon. We should head back and decide on what to do tomorrow.”

The situation wasn’t bad, but we didn’t have much time left. It

was about time for Lily to fully recover. Rose was also nearly done with replenishing our armaments. Both these facts were something to be thankful for, but we would lose our chance for Gerbera to achieve something great.

We need to hurry up...

And so we headed back to the arachne nest as I suppressed the panic within me.



After returning to the nest, Lily greeted me with an enormous smile.

“Welcome back, Master!”

She clung to my arm and looked up at me. There wasn’t a single hint of exhaustion on her face. On the contrary, she was in oddly high spirits.

“I’m back... Is it okay for you not to be sleeping?”

“I’m doing great now. I just woke up a short while ago, though. Gerbera, welcome back.”

“M-Mm. I’m back...”

Now that I thought of it, it had been several days since Lily clung to me like this. I had been walking around the forest, and whenever I returned, I quickly had a meal and went to sleep. Moreover, Lily was spending a large portion of the day resting, so we never really got to talk.

It was possible her happiness was proportional to the needs she accumulated over time. I was also glad to feel her warmth and see her so healthy. But although I was happy, this was a little troublesome. It was clear as day she would ask to come along on our exploration of the forest now that she was healthy.

It was more convenient to search the forest alone with Gerbera so we could improve her relationship with Rose. So, what was I to do?

I immersed myself in such thoughts with Lily’s love-filled dinner before me. Today’s meal was firefang, which I was accustomed to by now... And just as always, it was pretty bad. And tough. Lily’s love was unable to overcome the poor quality of the ingredients.

“I’ll be coming along starting tomorrow,” she said.

“You’ve only just recovered. How about taking it easy for just a bit longer?”

“I’m totally okay. I’ve got a ton of energy.”

“I took care to rest an extra day after recovering myself, didn’t I?”

I pretended not to notice Lily’s dissatisfied expression and continued eating my meal. It was a poor attempt to buy some time. We clearly had little hope of accomplishing anything in just one day. But it was better to at least have the chance to do so.

“Oh yeah, there’s something I need to tell you about.”

I cut off Lily’s objections by forcefully changing the subject. Besides, I wasn’t lying about having something to tell them. As a result of speaking with Gerbera about the area, I managed to figure out a few things.

“Looks like there’s some hope we can get out of this forest. Thanks to Gerbera, that is.”

“Gerbera?” Lily asked, surprised. She shot a glance over to Gerbera, who nodded with a stiff expression.

There were still some reservations left between these two girls. Lily was acting perfectly naturally, but it looked like Gerbera still felt deeply indebted to her. Lily had taken by far the most damage on that fateful evening, seeing that she had to rest until now to recover. Inevitably Gerbera would feel sorry about that. Seeing her like this made me want to do something about it quickly, but there was nothing I could do.

“Gerbera said she once made it all the way to the edge of the forest before, right?”

“M-Mm. That’s right.” I forced the conversation forward, and Gerbera finally began explaining. “Perhaps we should start from the beginning. It happened quite a long time ago. The two of you are probably unaware of this, but there were three occasions throughout my long life where humans similar to our lord have entered this forest in great numbers. Those were the only times I ever saw humans before now.”

“Hmm.” Lily raised her voice in admiration. “So, there’s humans in this world other than the ones teleported here like our master, huh?”

“That’s what I thought too,” I said.

We had been teleported into the middle of a dense forest, so we were unable to confirm the presence of other humans in this world. It was unknown whether they existed or not.

“Having said that, I kind of guessed they existed based on that hut.”

“Mmm. Oh yeah, that thing.”

I was referring to the hut we found Katou in, which was now reduced to mere wreckage. When we found it, I largely conjectured there were other humans in this world. Although, this could’ve been a planet dominated by apes or some upright slugs or something. There were monsters here, so I couldn’t laugh off such possibilities. In that sense, Gerbera’s firsthand account of seeing actual humans was quite valuable.

“Naturally, with so many humans in the forest, they were sure to leave traces as they moved. There was no way we monsters wouldn’t

notice. It was like a surging wave. At the time, I was just one among the wave. And as we chased the humans, we ended up at the forest's edge before we knew it."

"I believe the humans Gerbera found were a human military force," I added. "They were apparently an armed group wearing similar equipment. That said, everything had already become chaotic by the time she arrived, so they didn't really act like an army by that point."

Each one was apparently wearing armor, a helmet, a sword, and a shield. From what I'd heard, they were in all likelihood soldiers from some country here in this world. As far as Gerbera knew, they didn't appear to be armed with any sort of firearm. The reason they were largely armed with swords instead of spears was perhaps because of having to fight in a forest, where there were many obstacles.

"So, according to Gerbera's previous experience, the shortest distance out of the forest would be straight north. Well, what we consider north, at least."

"Allow me to add that this was a long time ago. It's possible the boundary of the forest has changed."

Lily clapped her hands together and smiled at Gerbera. "Even so, this is way better than knowing nothing!" She really didn't harbor any bad feelings toward her anymore. On the contrary, her smile looked like she was trying to show Gerbera she was willing to meet halfway on the matter. Her attitude helped ease my worries, especially in the current situation where I was swamped with problems.

"Huh?" Lily muttered as she suddenly realized something. "...Didn't the first expeditionary force go east?"

"Yeah. It seems their top brass doesn't have any luck."

Not that we had any luck ourselves, having followed behind them. It was entirely possible they changed course after realizing it. In that case, Mizushima Miho's childhood friend Takaya Jun would end up in an endless chase after them, though.

"Well, if they go far enough east, they'll eventually get out of the forest." It wasn't like the forest could go on forever. There was in fact a boundary to the north, after all.

"So, are we going to head north now?" Lily asked.

"...About that. I'm honestly a little conflicted."

Going east meant we would likely encounter the first expeditionary force. This was the best choice for finding someone to take care of Katou. However, going that way would mean spending more time in the forest.

Sooner or later, we had to get out of here. The environment was far too horrible to live in for a long period of time. Now that we had Gerbera with us, our safety shot up considerably, but the problem of

our nutrition couldn't be solved through her brute force.

It was better to head north and gather what we needed from a human settlement. We could definitely get through the forest with our current forces, and we were very likely to find a settlement that way. An armed force meant some nation was located in that direction. No matter what form it took, a disorderly society wouldn't have been able to form an army.

However, we wouldn't be able to rendezvous with the expeditionary force that way. So, the problem of finding someone to guarantee Katou's safety became more pronounced. It was a difficult decision.

"Well, I guess we don't really have to decide right away." That was my conclusion. They did say that rushing things led to blunders. It was better for us to think it over carefully before taking action.

"...Now that I think of it..." Katou, who had been silently listening all this time, suddenly joined the conversation.

"—!" I was stretching out for a spit of firefang meat and came to an unintentional stop upon hearing her voice. "...What is it, Katou?"

I forced myself to move, grabbed the spit, and took a bite. Lily, who was nestled up right next to me, was seemingly the only one who noticed anything strange about my behavior. She was looking at me with a slightly curious expression.

"It's nothing major. I was just a little curious. Gerbera said she'd only seen humans other than us on those three occasions when those armies entered the forest, right?"

"That's how I heard it... Is that true?" I said as I turned to Gerbera.

"M-Mm," she replied while nodding like a small child.

"You never met any humans other than us wearing school uniforms...? I mean, clothes like ours?" Katou asked her.

"You mean those who were sent here with you? No, I've never met them."

"In which case... Senpai?"

Katou shifted her focus to me, and I raised my gaze from my food. I had managed to get my agitation under control by then. But even so, the moment I met her eyes, my heart made a strange noise.

"We found a bunch of mangled corpses, remember? The ones we thought were killed by a high monster. So, if Gerbera never met any of the students, it means she wasn't the one who killed them."

"...Now that you mention it, yeah."

We had once found five mangled corpses, including one of a cheater. He was a warrior who didn't possess any sort of peculiar ability; only his physical strength and mana were enhanced. Warriors were still supposed to be preposterous enough that they couldn't be killed by anything short of a high monster. And even then, it would be

difficult for the monster. The reason we left the cave in the first place was because we feared bumping into that high monster in the area.

After that, we were attacked by Gerbera. I completely assumed she had killed those students... Or rather, there was so much going on I totally forgot about them. But now that Katou mentioned it, Gerbera couldn't be the culprit. Moreover, thinking back on it, several other facts stood out. All of the corpses looked like they were torn apart by teeth. Gerbera wasn't that sort of carnivorous beast.

"Mangled corpses? What's this about?" Gerbera asked.

Just as we thought, she knew nothing about them. Did that mean there was another high monster around there who stood as an exception among monsters? Things didn't make sense if that wasn't the case, but it still seemed strange regardless.

Monsters fundamentally didn't get along amongst themselves. They were even openly hostile to each other depending on the circumstances. This wasn't like an RPG where monsters happily lined up side by side with different species in a united front.

In fact, monsters didn't even approach the arachne nest we were currently staying in. This was presumably because the monsters who were liable to do so had all been exterminated over the years. It took us five days to walk from the mangled corpses to this nest. A monster would've been able to cover that distance in far less time.

A monster would need to gather mana over many, many years to become a high monster. For example, Gerbera had already lived many human lifetimes. If there was another high monster in such a confined region, it would mean the two of them coexisted for centuries. Was that even possible? I had no choice but to think so; there was no evidence to prove otherwise.

"In any case, we'll just have to keep it in mind," I concluded.

"Right," Katou replied.

She really was talented. She pointed out something I didn't even realize. Calling her sharp and able... felt a little off in a way. Katou simply had a knack for reading the flow. Even considering how I wasn't good at this, she looked like she had a discerning and clever nature. How was she capable of that? It was somewhat of a mystery now that I thought of it. Just wondering how she could come up with stuff like this started to make me suspicious.

"..."

I grit my teeth and pushed down my bitter memories. I was disgusted with myself for thinking of the person who saved my life in such a way. One could say I was getting better, seeing that I was at least self-aware now, but this wasn't a valid excuse. I had a responsibility to repay the favor of saving my life.

It wasn't just a moral matter. Katou covered areas where I was

lacking, just like she did now. Gerbera was correct in saying she was worth consulting. In that sense, I needed to quickly do something about my relationship with her.

But even as I recognized the necessity for this, I still didn't know what to do. Thus, I quickly went to bed to prepare myself for the last precious opportunity left for Gerbera the following day... I only realized this was a mistake sometime later.

Chapter 6: The Passageway to the Heart, the Path of Mana

The following day, I got ready to leave the arachne nest bright and early.

“My Lord. I’ve finished what you asked for.”

Gerbera handed me some clothes before we departed. It was something I previously requested from her. She could weave cloth at a tremendous speed, but finishing it this quickly was out of the question, so around half of the shirt was made using cloth she already had stockpiled.

The top was a simply made white garment with somewhat baggy sleeves, but it was robust enough to wear while walking through the forest. The pants were also white, making the whole outfit somewhat questionable, but I didn’t really have the luxury to be complaining about fashion.

“It suits you, My Lord.”

“...Really?”

Gerbera gave me a look over after I changed and for some reason began fidgeting about as she blushed. I was curious whether this was because she was happy I was wearing something she made or because she realized I now matched her. Or perhaps it was because these clothes were made of her own threads, so in a certain sense... her threads were wrapped all over my body, stimulating her instincts as a spider. I decided not to think about it too much and put on the black chest protector Rose had made me. After attaching my pseudo-Damascus steel sword at my hip, my preparations were complete.

Rose’s armor and Gerbera’s clothes were made completely independent of each other, but in the future, I wanted them to cooperate together to make them. They would of course do it now if I ordered them to, but it was clear that would leave deep-seated roots of resentment between them lasting far into the future. Doing so wouldn’t bring about immediate results anyway, and there was no particular need for us to hurry. This really was something better off done after the air was cleared up between them.

“My Lord,” Gerbera said as she anxiously looked at me.

“What’s up?”

“Um, it’s nothing much. You just looked somewhat pale.”

“I do?” I tried touching my own cheek. The feeling against my

fingers was somewhat cold. "...It's nothing serious. Don't worry about it."

It was true I had a lot to think about lately, and I didn't get much sleep yesterday because of it. However, I didn't feel unwell, and I wasn't particularly sleepy. I was still somewhat weary from walking for the last few days, but it was well within my own limits. I didn't require rest.

"Let's go."

Gerbera was still looking at me with concern, but I urged her on as we departed the arachne nest. After actually getting a move on and showing I wasn't lying, she didn't bring it up anymore.

We arrived at our destination after about an hour. It was a fairly large lake, and the local wildlife used it as a water source. We continued walking for about another hour and encountered two monsters in the process. One was a bear with a rabbit's head we called a rough rabbit. The other was something like a one-meter-tall crayfish which split the water's surface as it leapt out. This one I never heard of back in the Colony, so I just gave it the name big scissors.

I wanted to find these monsters again. We hadn't encountered them before, so I at least needed to feed them to Lily to enhance her combat abilities. One would be enough for her, but that wasn't my point.

Lily needed to eat a large portion of a monster's body for her mimicry to fully manifest. Because of that, we wouldn't get to eat the meat from the rough rabbit and big scissors. Of course, we didn't need to eat them. We did have a sufficient stockpile of firefang meat, after all. However, even so, I wanted to eat them. I was already pretty sick of the tough and chewy firefang meat.

I wasn't a particularly picky eater, but I really was getting tired of eating the same bad food every day. I wanted to eat something other than lizards and rats. The big scissors in particular looked quite tasty. It might have a rather earthy or dull taste, considering it was a crayfish, but I was convinced that wouldn't be a problem. The quality of our current food stores was just that bad. Having said that, I couldn't increase the burden Gerbera carried around just to satisfy such petty needs. I would have to wait until the next time we found one to enjoy the big scissors as a meal.

While I took a break, thinking of such things, Gerbera finished "packing" our goods. The rough rabbit was quite large, so the cocoon it was wrapped in was equally huge. Watching her casually drag it along was somewhat humorous.

"Good work out there."

"You too, My Lord."

Gerbera held out Rose's handmade flask toward me. It was filled

with water from the nearby lake, which I could drink without having to boil. Water was actually quite heavy, so Gerbera was carrying basically all of it except for what I needed to quench my thirst as we walked.

“Thanks.”

And just as I was about to take the flask from her...

“...Urgh?”

My vision blurred and I saw countless little sparkling lights about me. It was just for an instant. However, the timing was bad. My hand missed the flask Gerbera was holding out.

“Ah.”

My fingers brushed against it and knocked it to the ground. Water began drizzling out. I went to hurriedly pick it up, but about a third of it had already spilled out.

I really did it now...

I was, of course, not talking about the water.

“Is something wrong, My Lord?” Gerbera looked at me with a suspicious gaze. “It’s been on my mind for quite a while now. Your condition seems somewhat strange.”

“...Strange, how?”

“You’ve been making mistakes once in a while that aren’t like you. Are you perhaps hiding something from me?”

Gerbera’s red eyes stared right into mine. Just staring and staring... Her gaze didn’t show any signs of wavering. She seemed completely convinced of herself. I tried thinking of a way to gloss this over, but it was unreasonable to try. I had been spending the last few days almost entirely with her. She was the one who supported my measly human self as we searched the forest. Even if this didn’t happen, she would’ve realized it sooner or later.

“It’s nothing serious...” I started with the necessary preface and then divulged my current situation to her. “It seems my eyes have been acting up lately.”

“Your eyes?”

“Yeah.”

I only became aware of it myself recently. The first occurrence I could remember was about four days ago, when I was talking to Lily in a sleepy daze.

“My vision gets blurry, and at worst, I see some sparkling white lights...”

“Is that not serious?!” Gerbera screamed as she quickly closed in and grabbed my face with both hands.

This was the maximum speed of the white arachne. It was impossible for me to dodge. I was now staring at her beautiful face, which I could only describe as being crafted by the hands of a god, at

point-blank range.

“Hmm...”

I could feel her breath as she continued staring at me. My heart spontaneously began pounding, but Gerbera didn't give off an erotic atmosphere at all. She was so seriously looking into my eyes that it was frightening. There would be no need for doctors if that was all it took to figure out someone's condition, though.

I wonder if there are doctors in this world...? Or do they maybe not need them since they have magic...?

“It really is just once in a while. It's nothing serious. Just as I said, my body feels fine.”

I started spinning up excuses as fast as I could when a small crease formed between Gerbera's brows.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Humans tend to get blurry vision when they get tired. It happens all the time.”

“You said something similar the other day to try and fool me, did you not?”

“...Anyway, give me some space.”

I pushed her back by the bottom half of her face, and the phrase “you reap what you sow” came to mind. It was somewhat of a rough way to treat a lady, but Gerbera was far stronger than any normal lady and didn't really pay it any mind.

She scoffed as she sank into thought and folded her arms. “But... White lights...? Hmm? Hmmm? Could it be...?” Her white eyebrows, which looked like they were drawn with a thin brush, rose up ever so slightly.

“What?”

“Nothing much. I'm just curious about something.” Gerbera held out her slender hand in front of my eyes. “Let me check quickly. Take a look here, My Lord.”

“Hm?”

“...This manner of thing isn't really my specialty, though.”

A few seconds after Gerbera squinted her eyes...

I did as she said and looked at the tip of her fingers. “Huh?” I said, dumbfounded.

There were sparkling white lights right at her fingertips. They were the same lights I had seen every now and then for the last few days.

“H-How...?”

“Like I thought,” Gerbera said with a slightly tired expression. She pulled back her hand, and the lights immediately vanished. “I didn't think it would truly be the case, though,” she continued with a sigh. “My Lord, you've become able to sense mana.”

“Mana...? Me?”

“Mm. There’s no mistaking it.” Gerbera nodded with a deadly serious expression.

She wasn’t joking, but it was difficult for me to swallow. “So you say, but I don’t have any aptitude for magic. The cheaters who could use magic back in the Colony clearly told me so.”

“There’s not much I can say about that.” Even as she stated the obvious, Gerbera offered her own thoughts on the matter. “However, if that is in fact true, it certainly is rather strange.” She folded up her legs and took a seat as she cocked her head. “Anyone is capable of using magic so long as they possess mana. And as long as one possesses enough mana, it isn’t all that difficult to see it. The ability to observe it is necessary to be able to use magic... However, the groundings for being able to do so aren’t meant to change.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Mm. The groundings I’m referring to basically sum up to the aggregate amount of mana one is able to possess. For some reason, your capacity for mana has increased, My Lord.”

I wasn’t sure why, but I couldn’t be happy about that. It really wasn’t a disadvantage for me. On the contrary, it was actually quite convenient. However, it felt bad knowing my body was changing yet it was a complete mystery.

“Is it because we defeated monsters? I heard you can obtain mana that way, right? That’s how the exploration team in the Colony grew stronger.”

“That’s certainly one way of doing so, but it isn’t particularly efficient. I mentioned the groundings for mana aren’t supposed to change. Even if you killed 100 or 1000 monsters, it would still be questionable whether your mana would be noticeably elevated. There is of course a difference between you and me in this regard, though.”

“Our capacities are completely different, you mean.”

“Precisely. But, well, even though you accompanied me, you weren’t the one to deal the finishing blows.”

“That’s true.” Meaning the monsters we defeated didn’t have anything to do with it.

“So, maybe there’s a more efficient way, and you’ve been doing it without realizing, but...”

“Yeah...” I scratched my head. “I don’t get it. It’s worth celebrating if I’m able to use magic because of this, though...” I suddenly grimaced upon noticing Gerbera’s complicated expression. “What’s up?” I asked.

“What are you saying, My Lord?”

“Hm?”

“Are you not already using magic?”

She looked exasperated, but unfortunately, I had no idea what she was talking about.

“...What do you mean?”

“You really haven’t noticed? We are connected together by the mental path. That itself is a splendid form of magic.”

“...Really?”

“How do you not know this?”

“Even if you ask me that...”

I scratched my head. The normal students of the home team could possibly learn magic, but only a handful were given the chance to. My knowledge of magic was just a smattering of what they knew in the Colony. I didn’t know what it was actually like, so it was pretty much a given I never thought of the mental path that way.

Although, thinking back on it, the mysterious power which connected us couldn’t really be accomplished by anything other than mana. Meaning I’d been using magic without even knowing it. Put another way, my cheat was a type of magic that was always in operation.

Magic which connected my heart to the hearts of monsters. It seemed kind of fancy when put like that, and didn’t really seem to suit a guy like me...

“...”

Now that I think of it... Why was I given a cheat like this?

A certain doubt suddenly came to mind. The humans who were teleported to this world were given cheats. The reason for this was still a mystery, but if this applied to everyone, it perhaps meant it was some kind of necessity peculiar to this world.

So, was there some kind of necessity which granted me this power? If so, why this ability in particular? This might just sound like complaining, but I wasn’t really. This wasn’t about being able to avoid my fate if I had an easier-to-understand ability that manifested while I was at the Colony. Nor was it about an always operational ability being far too hard to use. Nor was it about its questionable power level as a cheat...

I didn’t mean to whine. This cheat was exactly what allowed me to meet Lily and the other girls, after all. That one point blew away any complaints I had. That’s why I only harbored doubt. Why did it end up like this...?

“...Hm? Wait a moment. The mental path?” Gerbera suddenly said, bringing my consciousness back from my speculations.

I looked over to her and saw that she had completely stopped moving as if she just realized something. The moment I wondered what this was about, Gerbera leapt in and grabbed my face at the exact same speed she did just a few minutes ago.

Again?

Or so I thought, but she looked a little strange this time.

“...”

Gerbera’s red eyes were staring right at me, just as before, but it looked like her focus was somewhere else.

“...So that’s how it is.”

“Hey, Gerbera.” I intentionally deepened my voice in displeasure and called her name. I felt like my voice would crack if I didn’t do so. “Don’t go convincing yourself without saying anything. Explain it to me. Also, give me some space.”

Gerbera really had to learn how attractive she was as a woman sooner than later. She was already displaying feelings for me, leaving my heart in somewhat of a mess. She was my servant, a very special existence to me. On top of that, I let her spoil me while my heart was weakened the other day. It wouldn’t be weird for this to completely throw off my tempo. I couldn’t possibly mess with my relationship with my servants while my stance on it was so unclear. That’s what I decided, so I had to stand fast by my resolve.

“Mm. Pardon me.”

Gerbera obediently obliged. However, her gaze was still fixed deep within my eyes. She didn’t show any signs of noticing my discomfort. It was like she was implicitly telling me now wasn’t the time for that.

“My Lord. Stay calm and listen to me. My mana exists within your body.”

“...Huh?” It was so unexpected I was left completely flabbergasted. “...And what does that mean?”

“I’m unable to say for sure. This is normally impossible.” Gerbera shook her head as her pure white hair swung about. “However, I can at least surmise. The mental path between us is likely the main cause of this.”

“H-Hang on a sec. So, what? You’re saying the mana accumulating within me belongs to you?” I asked in complete confusion.

“Perhaps Lily and Rose’s mana are also mixed in there. Although, it’s such a minute amount I can’t sense it.”

“That can’t possibly be...” I was about to object but noticed I didn’t possess any knowledge to do so. “I guess... I guess that explains the sparkling I’ve been seeing ever since you became my servant.” At the very least, it never happened before that. “But why is it the mana within me only belongs to you?”

“Is that not a simple problem of volume? For example, consider the mana coming through the mental path as a leak, so to speak. If the same ratio is leaking from all of us, then the amount coming from me will be that much larger.”

“That makes sense.”

Meaning if the same phenomenon occurred before Gerbera became my servant, it wasn't at a level where I could sense it. Thinking back on it, they did say back in the Colony that mana dwelled in the soul. It was difficult for a mere student like me to tell what the soul even was, let alone distinguish it from the heart and mind. However, assuming they were all similar... and if not, assuming they were at least related, then it wouldn't be all that strange for the power which connected us, the mental path, to pass through said soul. Not that I could state such a thing definitively... That wasn't the important point here, anyway.

“So, what?” I wet my dry lips with my tongue and spoke in a slightly hoarse voice. “The more servants I assemble, the stronger my mana will get?”

“That's presumably the case. Or perhaps, even in your current state, we could increase your capacity for mana by streaming our mana through you.”

“If that's true... Then it doesn't sound all that bad, huh?”

I didn't possess much power. This applied in terms of our overall forces, but the far more fatal flaw here was my complete inability to fight for myself. I was far too weak. No matter how many powerful companions I gathered, our weak point would still be taken advantage of. This discovery held the possibility of overcoming that weakness. I trembled in excitement for the first time in quite a long time. The word magic was just that powerful.

“Maybe I'll ask Lily to start teaching me magic once we get back.”

It was a choice I didn't have any say in because of my lack of magical talent. Up until now, I was such a lost cause that simply swinging a sword would do me better. But the situation was different now. With some amount of grounding in place, it was surely best to make use of it. More so if continuously acquiring servants meant increasing my capacity for mana.

“It's a little regrettable I didn't notice sooner.” Those were my honest feelings on the matter, but it might have been a mistake to say them aloud.

“If you had consulted someone earlier, then you could have acted on it faster, My Lord... Oh, that's not right...” Gerbera looked somewhat sad upon realizing something. “This is my fault...”

“...”

The reason I didn't consult anyone about the irregularities happening to my body was because I didn't want my trips into the forest to be held back. I couldn't really deny this was because of Gerbera. Having said that, there was no need for her to feel any responsibility for it.

“It’s not really your fault.” I lightly plopped my hand on top of Gerbera’s pure white head as she sat there dejectedly.

“My Lord...”

“I did it because I wanted to. I was just being selfish.”

As a result of multiple factors all mixing together, I ended up concealing many things from my companions. This wasn’t a good thing. However, the situation was sure to change shortly. No. I was going to change it. I had to. I had to resolve all of my own problems as well as those of my servants. There was no other choice. I had a responsibility to do so as their master.

“Hm?” Just then, Gerbera’s expression stiffened up considerably. “My Lord!”

As expected of a top-tier combat specialist, Gerbera changed gears in an instant. I suddenly felt a tingling in the air. I rose to my feet as I followed her gaze. I was accustomed enough to this that I could at least take such action reflexively.

There was a shadow beyond the trees. I thought it was a firefang at first, but the shadow was far too small. Having said that, it was still as big as a medium-sized dog.

“...A fox?”

It had triangular ears and a fluffy tail. It was large for a fox, but compared to a firefang, it looked quite small. The size of a monster had nothing to do with how dangerous it was, though.

I immediately began digging through my knowledge from the Colony. “This is... a blowfox!”

Just as I yelled the name they appended to this monster back in the Colony, the fox began sucking in air and swelled up in size like a balloon. It grew into a sphere about five times its original size and looked at us with blood-crazed eyes. One would assume this was a form of intimidation much like a blowfish, but it wasn’t. This was the blowfox’s means of attack.

“Graaaah!”

It deflated its body and an orange fireball shot out of its mouth as it roared.



“My Lord!”

Gerbera picked me up and leapt away. The fireball missed and slammed into the tree we were standing in front of.

“—?!”

An explosion broke out with a thunderous roar. The trunk of the tree burst and was engulfed in a blaze. The “luggage” Gerbera had promptly cut loose—the spider cocoons with defeated monsters in them—were sent flying away by the shockwave, all the way to the edge of my field of vision. One of those cocoons contained the corpse of a rough rabbit, which was the size of a bear. The explosion must’ve been quite powerful to send it flying that far.

“...That’s quite the ridiculous kitsunebi.”

The blowfox’s flames were accompanied by a physical shockwave. The fire itself wasn’t as hot as a firefang’s, but its power couldn’t be so easily compared like that.

“Be at ease. This is nothing for me,” Gerbera told me reliably, probably sensing the threat I felt from this monster.

She was entirely right. The blowfox needed to wind up for each fireball it spat out, even if it just took two or three seconds. We weren’t poised for battle earlier, so she decided to evade just to be safe, but now she could deal with it before it spat fire again. If the blowfox actually decided to attack, she would’ve undoubtedly done so in an instant.

“Hm?”

But that didn’t happen. After seeing its first attack evaded, the blowfox turned tail and ran. It was a splendid decision, in a sense... But now wasn’t the time to be praising it.

“It’s getting away!”

“I know! Let’s go, My Lord!”

If my memory served me right, blowfoxes were just like firefangs in that they formed packs. It most likely would lead us to more monsters. As such, we started our chase of the blowfox just like we did with the firefang the other day.

Chapter 7: The Second Coming of Tyranny

Our blowfox was running away slower than the firefang we chased the other day, but it still felt like it was going fast. Or maybe it was better to say it was light on its feet. It was able to cut corners much tighter because of its smaller size. The firefang might have been faster in a straight line, but the blowfox could put up some fierce competition in a forest filled with obstacles. It was just a scant difference, though. The monster still couldn't escape Gerbera.

"...It's not meeting up with any of its kind," Gerbera muttered a few minutes into the chase.

"Is it a stray?" I asked her, paying careful attention not to bite my tongue while I looked at her beautiful face right in front of me.

"Perhaps," she whispered as she brought her face three centimeters closer. "If that's the case, there's no meaning in pursuing it any further."

"Right. Seems like we've chased it enough. Can you finish it off when you get the chance?"

"Very well... Although, with so much shrubbery around, it would be difficult to catch it with my threads. I cannot possibly increase my speed much more while carrying you either, My Lord..." Gerbera nodded but suddenly raised her brow and squinted her red eyes. "Drats, that sly little rascal. What a blunder. It's gone into a clearing."

Just as she said, there was an open area ahead of us that even I could identify at this distance. Such places came up once in a while during our exploration of the forest. The clearing was about ten meters in diameter, forming a crooked circle in the middle of the densely packed trees. I could see the brown earth between the sporadic undergrowth. It didn't look like a natural clearing, perhaps more the result of a recent forest fire.

In the one second it took me to think that, Gerbera arrived in the clearing. Just as she did, the blowfox dove into a thicket on the opposite side.

"You shan't get away!"

Gerbera leaped into the air with such elegance one wouldn't think she was handicapped by carrying me. But her landing in the middle of the clearing was the trigger for the perilous events to follow.



Let's talk a bit of theory. Our approach to more efficiently encountering monsters was to find packs of them, but how would the others react if we told them that? Lily would have absolutely been right here with us out of concern. Rose would've objected fiercely and we wouldn't even be here in the first place. And if I had consulted Katou about this, she would've likely realized the massive pitfall to our plan that I hadn't noticed.

I was now cognizant of this pitfall, one which threatened my life. Before, the following thoughts had gone through my mind:

Gerbera is here, so there's no need to fear common monsters.

Rare monsters are the targets for my taming ability, and they're not threats either.

If pushed to say, we only have to be careful of high monsters, but we won't meet those even if we try.

I wasn't wrong to think so. I wasn't wrong... But I forgot to factor one thing into my calculations: I was an enormous vulnerability—a fatal flaw. I thought I was well aware of the greatest weakness of my ability already. However, I was too naïve. I didn't scrutinize things adequately. I didn't spend enough time thinking about it... or more specifically, I didn't have the time to do so.

I needed to resolve the divide between Gerbera and Rose and the obligation I felt toward Katou, along with a whole bunch of other matters I had to carefully consider. There were a ton of things I needed to deal with, but I couldn't settle them all in a single day. Because of that, there were some things I ended up overlooking.

One example of this was how I completely overlooked the matter regarding the mangled corpses that Katou pointed out yesterday evening. And now, my oversight was exposed in the worst way possible.

I judged it impossible for any monster to surpass Gerbera in battle. That wasn't a mistake. But I was wrong to stop thinking there. Gerbera was in fact overwhelmingly powerful. It would be difficult for any monster in this forest to beat her in a head-on confrontation. However, that didn't mean we would be safe in any situation. That's because there was only one of her.

This was perfectly obvious. We humans weren't capable of handling more than our two arms and legs could support. Gerbera had eight legs, but she still had a limit. To put it simply, I had forgotten that any single person could only do so much on their own.



“...Wha—?!”

My eyes shot open the moment Gerbera came out into the clearing. Taking the place of the blowfox who jumped into the thickets were other blowfoxes jumping out all around us, already swollen up like balloons. There were well over 30 of them. That's when I fully realized that what I truly needed to be careful of wasn't a high monster, whose existence couldn't even be proven, but a pack of common monsters attacking us in a wave of violence that even Gerbera couldn't keep up with.

The hunter had become the prey. By the time I regretted how shallow I'd been, the trigger had already been pulled.

"Uwaaaah?!"

Over 100 fireballs came rushing in, causing a surging wall of flames all around us. There was nowhere to run. The fiery scenery turned pitch black as I closed my eyes in despair. This could only be described as careless. Monsters didn't possess a firm will like humans, but they did have the same intelligence as animals. There were many animals back on Earth who hunted their prey strategically in packs, like wolves, lions, and hyenas. Meaning it wouldn't be strange for monsters to do the same.

This clearing was their hunting ground; after inviting us in, it was now our execution site. Nothing could be done anymore. It was over. That was what I seriously thought. I even pictured my own grave. However, just then...

"Like I'll let you!" Gerbera roared.

She freed up one of her hands while still carrying me and swung around ten or so spider threads like whips. I pretty much followed her hand with my eyes on reflex. There were fireballs right there in front of me. The dancing spider threads crashed into several of them.

I recalled the sight of the blowfox's fireball smashing into a tree. Given enough of a solid impact, the fireball exploded. This was of course no different for a spider thread swung about with the full might of a high monster.

The fireballs struck by the thread in midair began exploding one after the other. If they were impossible to dodge, then it was better for them to explode early. That was surely Gerbera's plan. It was a fairly violent approach, but there was no other means of escape.

The explosions occurred just a few meters away from us. Even if this was better than being swallowed up by them, we couldn't do anything about the hot blast of wind enveloping us. Gerbera held me tight against her body to shield me, but the heat still burned my skin.

I couldn't do anything but close my eyes and endure the pain. My screams were drowned out by the explosions and didn't even reach my own ears.

I just had to endure.

I just had to bear the pain.

Hardly enough time passed for a breeze to blow through, yet it felt a hundred times longer than that.

The bomb blast finally passed me by. But that wasn't the end.

"Sorry!"

I could barely hear Gerbera's voice as I half lost my consciousness. The situation began changing far faster than my thoughts could process.

"U-Uwaaah?!"

I had no idea what was going on anymore, and I was once more bathed in burning heat. The interval between the spider threads intercepting the fireballs was getting shorter. Gerbera was charging full force to break through the siege while carrying me.

The ground burned. The air was scorching. Fortunately, Gerbera's jumping power allowed her to charge in or retreat in an instant. Before I knew it, we were back into the dense atmosphere of the forest. Around the same time, a huge explosion broke out right behind us. I opened my eyes ever so slightly and saw a pillar of fire. The myriad of fireballs the blowfoxes spat out had crashed right into the center of the clearing we were occupying just moments ago and exploded in unison.

It was a horrifying sight. If Gerbera had taken just a split-second longer to make her decision, we would've been right in the middle of the explosion. She could likely survive the blast on her own, but there was no way I would've walked out of there. It was questionable whether I'd even leave a corpse. Just from our retreat, I was left with burns on my face and limbs. If not for the clothes Gerbera made of her own threads, my entire body would've been burned, presumably killing me from the shock.

"We're withdrawing!" Gerbera screamed as she stooped down and leaped once more.

She was desperately trying to get away from the pack of blowfoxes. However, just as she was about to jump for the third time, Gerbera dug her talons into the ground and stopped. She had no other choice but to do so.

"It can't be... That's impossible..."

Such despair was unbecoming of her. But when I looked, I could see through my hazy vision what left her completely speechless.

There were a countless number of giant, lily-like flowers hanging down from the trees. I knew full well this was a monster in the form of a creeper. We brought one back for Lily as a souvenir yesterday. These were bullet creepers. They were parasites who absorbed nutrition from trees and scattered seeds from their flowers like bullets to actively assault their prey. Gerbera had stepped foot into an area

where they were clinging to the trees as far as the eye could see.

Their response was ferocious. Countless bullet-like seeds shot out from the flowers and tore through the air. I felt an impact on my left hand from the first volley. After that, I was just in shock.

“Gaaah! Aaargh?!”

I took a shot to my shoulder. A seed dug into my stomach. Blood shot out of my thigh. It might have been fortunate that my consciousness was in a haze already from the burns, rendering my entire body somewhat numb. Discounting the horrible misfortune that had befallen me, that is.

Actually, calling this bad luck was somewhat inappropriate. Interpreting our escape into bullet creeper territory as bad luck was misinterpreting the problem. No matter how much bad luck I had, this kind of coincidence was out of the question. It was more natural to assume that this was part of the blowfoxes' ultimate trap.

The reason Gerbera ran away in this direction had nothing to do with a whim. This was the most efficient route to get away from the initial trap. In other words, she chose to break through where their siege was weakest. And that's where the second trap awaited us. Meaning the blowfoxes were using the bullet creepers.

The monsters of this world weren't like those in RPGs. They didn't line up side by side for battle regardless of race. However, one could still use another against a common foe. The initial trap they created was already deadly, and there was an even more deadly trap awaiting those who tore through their net. Perhaps such behavior was how the relatively weak blowfox survived in this forest.

After several more seconds of being torn up in a storm of violence, the volley of fire from the bullet creepers came to a stop. I didn't know how many Gerbera had managed to intercept or how many she managed to take with her own body to cover for me. The fact that I got away without any fatal blows to my head or vitals was undoubtedly because she was desperately protecting me.

However, that was naught but futile resistance. The bullet creepers around us were ready for their next volley. The large pack of blowfoxes was closing in behind us. Gerbera had managed to just barely get me through this, but this was the end.

Actually, it was worth praising her for getting me this far. Asking for more was just unreasonable. I resolved myself for death through my hazy consciousness.

“Don't...”

However, Gerbera had yet to give up. This refusal to abandon hope... this insistence to survive through all odds was likely what allowed her to live so long and opened the path to becoming a high monster. There was no way of making her give up other than tearing

her young heart to shreds like Katou did. She was just that manner of horror.

“Don’t screw with me!”

Gerbera screamed as if denying the foreseeable future with all her might and let go of the luggage she had been carrying all this time—me. Now that her hands were free, she sheltered my body with her large body and legs.

“...”

I was now lying on the ground face up. All I could see was the original form of the white arachne above me. She had spent ages all alone. She fought all on her own. Because of that, she wasn’t used to fighting while protecting someone. Her true value in battle was fighting independently. Now that she had set aside the fetters which were tying her down, she was free.

In the short time allotted to her, when the bullet creepers were still loading their next volley and the blowfoxes had yet to arrive, Gerbera went on the offensive.

“Never again! I shall never allow my lord to face death because of me ever again!”

Gerbera swung both her arms. She brandished as many threads as she could manage and spread them into her surroundings indiscriminately. They struck everything in sight. Monsters. Trees. Anything and everything. There was no precision to it, and many of the threads missed. But Gerbera didn’t pay such trifling matters any mind. There was no need to. The threads wound about everything except for me, hidden under her body. Then, she took a firm grasp of all of them in her hand.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

She let out a bloodcurdling scream which shook the very air of the forest. Her eight legs dug into the ground. Gerbera was now fixed to the spot with her talons deeply taking root. It was the second coming of the white horror, the incarnation of tyranny.

All she did was pull on her threads at full force. That was it. However, what did such a simple action mean when performed by a horror among monsters?

The world contracted in on her position. The scene before my eyes was so absurd I could only see it as such. Her white threads pulled everything in sight with a terrifying force. The trees collided with each other as they were uprooted and smashed to bits with a roar. The bullet creepers wrapped around the trees could do nothing as they were torn off and flattened. The blowfoxes, just a step away from being caught in the disaster, ran away immediately.

Everything in the area, regardless of whether they were caught by her threads, met the same fate. Crashed, smashed, torn apart, and

thrown into the air. Everything she pulled up collided one last time in the skies and was pulverized to pieces.

Broken fragments of wood, greenery, and monsters jumbled together in the sky and fluttered down like snowflakes. Nothing had retained its original shape. Even in my current state, I felt like laughing. This was some serious nonsense.

I had such a force at my command, yet I managed to make such a tremendous blunder. I was beyond redemption. I completely failed at being a master. To all the girls. That's what I seriously thought. It was so pathetic I felt like I was better off just dying here.

"My Lord! Keep it together!"

Nevertheless, I couldn't afford to die. My life was one Lily, Rose, and now Gerbera desperately fought to protect. I had a responsibility to survive even if I had to sink my teeth into a rock to cling for dear life.

"I'll bring you to Lily immediately! Stay strong!"

I no longer possessed the strength to reply to her. I was bleeding all over. My flesh was burned, covered in red and black. However...

Like hell I'm gonna die here.

And as Gerbera carried me away, I desperately clung to life.

Chapter 8: The Sisters' Way

Gerbera headed directly to the arachne nest while carrying me. My consciousness was still in a haze. The world felt so far away. I didn't really feel much pain. We went as fast as possible without encountering any monsters and arrived at the nest where Lily and the others were waiting for us.

"Master?!"

"S-Senpai!"

Rose turned around and screamed in an uncharacteristic fashion while Katou went completely pale.

"Master!" Lily leaped toward us and practically wrenched me away. I was set faceup on the floor where she ripped off my armor and tore apart my bloody clothes.

Lily gulped as if she was holding down her screams. White light immediately began pouring from her hand. This was the healing magic she specialized in. The bleeding from my bullet wounds began to subside. Magic really was impressive. A warm light enveloped my body and brought me relief... for a moment, at least.

"Gaaaargh?!"

The healing progressing meant my dulled nerves were recovering—regardless of my wounds not being fully healed yet. Healing magic was usually accompanied by an anesthetic effect, but apparently my current condition was beyond that. There was of course nothing as convenient as painkillers on hand either.

I had no choice but to grit my teeth and bear it. Katou screamed something and Lily jammed her finger in my mouth. She was stabilizing my jaw so that I wouldn't bite my tongue. Then Lily was screaming. Sleek and firm hands held my body down. This was surely Rose, who was pinning me down as I writhed in pain. The only voice I couldn't hear was Gerbera's.

Where did she go?

That thought remained in the one part of my brain that was liberated from the pain assaulting my body.

"I can manage the burns with healing magic one way or another. As for the seeds..."

I could hear Lily's sorrowful voice. They were in the middle of discussing something. I was practically reduced to an animal and no longer had the faculties to understand what they were saying. All I

could process was pain.

“...Rose, your knife.”

I could only hear sounds. I didn't understand what they meant. I didn't want to.

“Sorry, Master.”

Something—s—dig—nto—my—bod—

“Guaah?! Aaargh?! Gaaah?!”

It hurts... It hurtsithurtsithurtsithurts—!

If this was true pain, then what was I even feeling just moments ago? It felt like this sensation was meant to destroy my very being. I writhed about as much as I could to ease my agony and suffering. I bit down as hard as I could and tried to bear it. I was liable to bite Lily's finger right off. She undid the mimicry on her finger and a slimy and pliable substance caught my teeth.

As pain ran through my body, my muscles began contracting unnaturally. My arm reflexively began spasming, so a puppet's hand held it down, creaking with every movement. The congestion of blood from my muscles contracting also had my body jumping about on its own.

Stomach, shoulder, collarbone, waist, and thigh. They plucked seeds out one by one as the noise of something dripping from a heavy and damp material resounded in the air. It felt like I was in hell.

I wanted to lose consciousness, but I knew this was a bad idea. I was like a sailor clinging for life aboard a ship in the middle of a storm. The moment I loosened my grip, I would sink into the darkness never to emerge again. All I could do was endure the pain.

Just endure, and endure, and endure, and endure...

I wonder how much time passed, exactly? By the time I could no longer perceive my pain as such, Lily had finished her bloody work. She once more cast healing magic. Magic really was great. If not for this, I would have died many times over already.

“No way. Why...?!”

After being reduced to nothing more than an animal, it took me a fair amount of time to regain my sanity.

“I took out all the seeds... I closed all his wounds... I treated all the burns... So... Why...?!”

I could see the white light of healing magic through my eyelids. Thanks to Lily's earnest treatment, the pain that had been tormenting my entire body was gone. However, my body was abnormally sluggish.

Writhing about had exhausted my stamina, leaving my abused muscles spent. I had pretty much rampaged from the pain. Or at least, I think I did; I couldn't really remember. After that, it was natural for me to be tired... But I felt like my sluggishness didn't stem from

fatigue.

My body wasn't working on a fundamental level. I still had the shakes. My body was like a bowl with a hole in it. Because of that, I couldn't put any strength into my muscles. It was like my own body belonged to someone else. I couldn't even lift a single finger.

A white fog closed in from the edge of my consciousness. If I let myself fall asleep, I was sure to never wake again. I couldn't rid myself of that bad feeling even after my wounds were supposed to be healed. Was it simply because the wounds I suffered were so great?

I knew healing magic wasn't omnipotent. Lily's grade 3 healing magic couldn't deal with lost limbs. When she suffered deep wounds herself, she had to spend several days recovering. And treating the dead with healing magic was impossible. Did that mean my wounds surpassed those limits? If so, I was going to die right here.

I don't want to die... I can't afford to die... I still haven't repaid...

"...It's my fault."

Just then, I heard Gerbera's voice. It felt like it had been quite some time since I heard it. I faintly opened my eyes. Just doing that took a tremendous amount of effort.

I could see Lily and Rose next to me through my thin field of vision. Lily's right hand had reverted to a human shape and was still in my mouth, while her left hand had a healing glyph on it and was hovering over my chest. Rose had practically mounted me to pin me down earlier, but now she was sitting by my right side. She was probably on standby in case I began struggling again. I could see Katou with a stiff expression, her hand on Rose's shoulder.

Where's Gerbera...?

I searched for a while by moving my eyes and finally found her. She was right there, a good three meters away from me. Her eight legs were folded, and her expression was completely crestfallen.

"It's... my fault..."

Her shoulders drooped in a dejected manner. Her skin was already so white it was almost transparent, but now her face looked as white as a sheet.

"...Can you explain what happened?" Lily asked.

There was restraint in her voice. I couldn't tell what she was thinking just by looking at her face or by listening to her. I didn't even have the faculties to sense what she felt through our mental path.

"We..."

Gerbera began honestly retelling everything that had happened. About how we explored the forest together and my intentions for doing so. About what went on between us. About how I wanted to look for other means of searching for monsters, seeing that we hadn't found any servants. About how we realized the nearby lake would be

a good spot. About how we started taking on packs and the disaster that followed when we thought it was going well... Her summary was the same as my memory. There was just one definitive difference.

"...It's all... my fault." Gerbera put her hands to her head and crouched down. "I really haven't changed. My inborn nature is the same as before. I'm nothing more than a calamity for our lord."

Gerbera felt indebted to us. She couldn't wipe away the past of having hurt us before. This tormented her even now like a sort of trauma.

"How foolish. I already knew this. As long as I remained nearby, I was sure to hurt you all again...!"

I had formulated many plans for Gerbera's sake. Also, taking on packs of monsters would've been impossible without her. In that sense, one could interpret this as being her fault. However, that wasn't my view of things. It was my fault it ended up like this, not hers.

Gerbera did well. The fact that I was still breathing was a result of her great efforts. There wasn't a single reason for her to feel responsible. Her cognition that she was at fault for this was wrong. I could clearly declare that. However, Gerbera didn't think the same.

"I should never have... remained by your side..."

Gerbera sank to the floor... and all my plans crumbled to pieces. I wanted Gerbera to accomplish something great to overturn the unfortunate first impression she gave us so that Rose would accept her. And yet, far from overturning it, we ended up with the current state of affairs.

Regardless of the circumstances, it was true that Gerbera hadn't been able to fully protect me. All the mistakes fell into her lap because of me. Even if I wanted to call out to her now, I couldn't speak with my weakened body. I couldn't even make excuses for her. All I could do was look on as I was about to lose something precious to me.

Goddammit... Why did it end up like this?

It wasn't like I was acting on a whim. I wasn't being optimistic nor was I having fun. I thoroughly thought of what to do, worried over the possibilities, and chose a course of action that was supposed to be safe.

However, I overlooked far too much. All my efforts were thrown back into my face, resulting in a grand disaster I wanted to avert my eyes from. I went through a horrible experience and was now liable to die at any moment. To top it all off, I was going to lose something precious to me.

Why did it end up like this? All I wanted was for all of us to get along happily...

"Gerbera."

Just then, a calm voice called Gerbera's name. I didn't even

realize this was Lily at first. That's just how calm her voice was. The girl who had been breaking down with my wounded body before her was nowhere to be found. She was lightly biting down on her charming lips, but she maintained her composure.

This was perhaps just a false front. Maybe it was even mimicry. She was that manner of being to begin with, specializing in showing others something she was not. However, even if that was the case, she was certainly maintaining her composure. This was something she was unable to do before.

"Did you say it's your fault our master was hurt?" Lily's voice was deeper than usual. "That's why you can't stay by his side?"

Lily's suppressed emotions leaked somewhat through her inflection. It was anger. Lily was silently angry. However, this wasn't directed at the fact that I was hurt.

"Do you really think our master wishes for that? Why do you think he's pushing himself so hard? Are you planning on wasting his feelings?"

Lily was thoroughly pissed at Gerbera, who was continuously blaming herself.

"But... I..."

"I don't want to hear any buts or howevers. You don't get it. You really don't get it at all. Not our master's feelings. Not even our feelings...!"

Lily shook her head and shot a gaze at Gerbera that would've made anyone flinch back.

"Hey, Gerbera. Before you became our companion... I was taught just one thing by the 'white arachne.'"

"...By me?"

"Yes. That I didn't have enough power... My heart and body were both immature. I couldn't protect my master on my own. I was made to know that more than I wanted to. So much so that I hated it," Lily said bitterly.

It was actually more correct to say the truth was thrust before her rather than she was taught anything, but Lily didn't avert her eyes from such unpleasant memories.

"However, at the same time, I learned how important it was to combine our strengths. This is just my own theory, but I think we servants are all lacking in our own ways. That's why if we don't compensate for each other, if we sisters don't combine our strengths, we'd be no good."

Lily was single-mindedly focused on the core of the matter. This was likely a problem she'd already found the answer to.

"I was our master's first servant. In other words, I'm the eldest sister. I decided I would become worthy of this title." She puffed out

her chest with pride. She looked even larger than she usually did to me. "I may be an unreliable older sister, but I won't ever reject or abandon my little sisters."

"Lily..."

"That doesn't change no matter what you think of yourself."

Lily did in fact accept Gerbera from the very beginning, even after she hurt me. I always wondered why that was, but this was apparently the reason.

"I would like you to support our master with us. I told you this already, didn't I?"

"But..." Gerbera began objecting, but then she remembered what Lily said. "What can I even do by supporting our lord together with him in such a state?"

Unlike Lily, who could use healing magic, Gerbera had no means of treating the injured.

"There's naught I can do. The only thing I was capable of was preventing it from happening. So, seeing that I was unable to protect him, I no longer..."

"Nope. There's something you *can* do." Lily cast her eyes down as she objected to Gerbera's claim. In a complete change from her firm attitude up until now, she seemed somewhat apologetic. "Actually, it's something *only* you can do, I guess."

"Something only I can do? Does such a thing exist?"

Lily nodded and looked down at me. "Just as you can see, our master is debilitated. Can you tell why?"

"Because he suffered great wounds? I've heard humans are quite fragile beings."

"Mm. That's true. But that's not the case here."

Gerbera frowned dubiously. "...What do you mean?"

"I have the memories of the human called Mizushima Miho. I also have my memories as a monster until this day. That's why I can tell our master's condition isn't normal."

"It isn't... normal? How, precisely?"

"His wounds have already been healed. My magic is working properly. He should be fine after recovering to this point."

Gerbera looked more and more baffled. "But is his complexion not getting worse by the moment?"

"Mm. That's why there's another reason for his condition. And I know what it is. I don't know why it happened, though..."

"Hm?"

"There's not enough mana in his body," Lily plainly stated as she shifted her gaze to the arachne. "Gerbera. Don't keep averting your eyes. Take a good look. You should be able to tell."

Gerbera jumped with a start. She hadn't looked at my injured

body this entire time, perhaps due to her sense of guilt. But after being urged by Lily, she finally did so with timid movements.

“...It’s true. His body does seem starved for mana.”

She squinted her red eyes as she looked down at me. She already had a track record of seeing the accumulation of mana within my body and unraveling the cause for this. Seeing that her analysis was the same as Lily’s, it meant my body truly was starved for mana.

Lily returned a nod. “All beings in this world possess mana to some extent. Monsters possess a remarkable amount, but any being possesses some amount of mana. And for some reason, our master and those who were transported to this world with him also possess mana. The fact that they could use magic without any cheats related to mana means this applies to all of them.” She took a brief pause there then shook her head. “I guess that doesn’t matter right now... Anyway, being starved for mana is the abnormality here. It isn’t all that strange to be dysfunctional when exhausted of something that should be there, right? For example, I’d no longer be able to hold my body together, and Rose wouldn’t be able to move. I don’t know how mana affects their bodily functions, but even the humans from another world are negatively affected by a lack of mana.”

“...I understand what you’re saying,” Gerbera said with a complex expression as she digested the details. “However, what would you have me do? It would be impossible to treat him if the cause remains unknown.”

“A complete recovery would be, yeah. We don’t know why this is happening and all... But we can try to perform a stopgap treatment.”

“A stopgap?”

“Mm. I’d like you to share your mana with him. You can think of it as something like a blood transfusion... Oh, I guess that doesn’t make any sense to you. Umm. You said his mana has been accumulating because our mana leaks to him through the mental path, right? So, we should be able to intentionally share our mana with him using it.”

“Can I say something, Lily?” Katou asked, joining the conversation. “The blood transfusion example makes perfect sense to me. So, a certain problem does come to mind. Could something like a difference in blood types cause an issue?” Katou’s complexion was poor, but she still had the wherewithal to point out the potential danger of such action.

“You’re right. But it’ll be fine,” Lily replied as she shot a fleeting glance over to her. “...I think. He’s already receiving mana from Gerbera as it is. It’s unlikely any problems will occur... Probably.”

“What do you plan on doing if something happens?!”

Gerbera was on the verge of screaming. This only stood to reason.

Lily's idea was nothing more than a guess. If it went poorly, I might die from such a "blood transfusion." However...

"Mm. I know. I'm also scared of what could happen. But... I don't even need to say what will happen if we don't do anything, do I now?"

At the current rate, I was going to die anyway. This was the only thing we had to gamble on.

"I don't know the reason, but our master's mana is weakening by the minute. However, if we can supply him with mana to match this..."

"It would be one thing if we can assume it'll work out if we're lucky, but you do not even know whether it can be done in the first place! What if, for example, I give him more mana than his capacity could hold?! By some chance, I... I... I could even kill him with my very own hands...!"

"We've got no choice but to believe in you there," Lily admitted. On the surface, she looked perfectly calm. Only the finger still in my mouth trembled ever so slightly. "At the very least, you can do it better than any of us. Moreover, with your capacity for mana, you should be able to continuously supply him with the amount needed."

Lily could manipulate magic of two different attributes and excelled in the use of mana, but she had to continuously use magic to stop my body from weakening as much as possible. Besides, she didn't possess nearly as much mana as Gerbera. Rose could only manipulate mana for making tools and moving her body. Whereas Katou was completely out of the question. Just as Lily said, this was something only Gerbera could do.

But even so...

Say, for example, that someone would die if their stomach wasn't cut open. How many people could do so without hesitation? Now say it was someone dear to them. The closer they were, the harder it was to maintain their composure. And with such a lack of composure, it was clear that only failure awaited them. This was the same logic behind doctors abstaining from operating on their own relatives.

"I... I can't..."

The simple thought that she could kill someone dear to her prevented Gerbera from moving. It was entirely natural. So, was there any way Lily wouldn't have predicted this? Of course there wasn't.

"Please, Gerbera." Lily looked straight into Gerbera's eyes and then bowed deeply. "I know you're scared of hurting our master. I also know this could kill him. I'm fully aware this is an endlessly cruel request. But I'd like to entrust this task to you." She had a full grasp of the situation, but she still lowered her head. "Please, Gerbera. Save our master."

“Lily...”

Gerbera stared back at her. Her red eyes were still filled with an abnormal level of fear at the thought of hurting me. However, as she gazed at the top of Lily’s flaxen head, her fear gradually dissipated. Gerbera feared solitude by nature, so conversely, her feelings of wanting to be of use to her companions were tremendously strong. Lily’s words were enough to shake her heart. The dispirited expression on her graceful face vanished and was now replaced with resolution. Her long, thin white hair swayed as she nodded.

“...Very well.”

“Gerbera!” Lily cheerfully shouted as she raised her head.

“Leave it to me,” Gerbera replied with an awkward smile plastered on her beautiful face.

She unfolded her legs and stood up, then she started walking toward me step-by-step. Three meters, then two. The distance between us slowly vanished.

“...”

However, her resolute steps were suddenly hampered by hesitation. The reason for this was clear. Gerbera’s red eyes were focused on the wooden puppet looking up at her.

“R-Rose...”

Her determination wavered. The fear that was supposed to have vanished was revived. Rose was the one who objected the most to entrusting Gerbera with my safety. What exactly were her thoughts on this matter? What would she say here? Such questions were clearly going through Gerbera’s mind.

“...What are you doing?” Rose said as she looked up at her with her featureless face. “Provide our master with your mana already.”

“Huh?” Gerbera muttered in blank astonishment.

She simply stood there in a daze, blinking repeatedly as if she couldn’t understand what Rose had said. Maybe she even felt this was a bit anticlimactic after putting herself on guard. I felt the same in this regard.

“Is that truly alright?”

“What is?”

“Do you not distrust me, Rose?”

Rose fell silent at that question. Although, she didn’t do so out of displeasure. She was simply thinking of how to respond, and her silence didn’t last all that long. This was perhaps because she had been thinking of her relationship with Gerbera all this time.

“Lily already told you this, so I’ll just be repeating after her... Rather, I’ll be asking you the very same question,” Rose said as a preface. “Gerbera, you said this was all your fault, correct?”

“Y-Yes...”

“I’m sorry to disagree with Lily, but I think so as well.”

Gerbera was on the verge of tears. She was inevitably thinking of how Rose would never come to accept her now.



“But... In that case, the same applies to me,” Rose continued. “No. My responsibility here is heavier. I couldn’t forgive you. I couldn’t accept you no matter what. My tactlessness, obstinacy, and immaturity brought about this situation.”

“Th-That’s not... You did so out of concern for our lord, did you not?”

“Even so, that doesn’t serve as an excuse for bringing about this result. At the very least, blaming you for this is barking up the wrong tree. As such, perpetrating further blunders would no longer be a matter of mere obstinacy on my part. It would simply be foolish.” Rose paused and then shook her head. “No, this is still dodging the issue, isn’t it...? There is something I must honestly tell you.”

Rose sounded like she was persuading herself. She took a look at Katou, who had her hand on Rose’s shoulder, then turned to face Gerbera once more.

“Gerbera, I cannot come to like you. I’ve come to understand your wish, due to certain circumstances. I’ve also... come to know of my own worthless wish. However, that doesn’t change the fact that I don’t like you. I still resent you for hurting our master for such a reason. However...”

After taking a short pause to focus her attention on her own feelings, Rose told Gerbera of the truth which lay deep in her heart.

“Even so, you’re my little sister.”

Gerbera’s red eyes opened wide like saucers. “Rose...”

“I’m also Lily’s little sister. I didn’t only feel a sense of duty to accept you because our master did... I also had feelings of wanting to accept you as a sister.”

Rose was usually one to discard her own opinions. Thinking back on it, this might have been the very first time she expressed such complex emotions. At the same time, it very easily expressed her intention to compromise and reconcile.

“Please take care of our master.” Rose lowered her head and stepped aside.

Something needed to happen to urge these two to reconcile. I couldn’t help but feel it was bad luck that *this* was what served as that trigger, but... even so, seeing the ice melt between my two servants was something worth celebrating.

“My Lord.” Gerbera came right up to my side. There was no timidity left in her expression. I could tell she was being supported by Lily and Rose’s words. “Please entrust your body to me.”

White threads fell from all her fingers as she held both her hands over me. My entire body was now connected to her.

“Let’s begin.”

Gerbera began passing her mana through the threads. Her slender fingers lit up with white lights which passed down like electricity and flowed into my body. It felt like something that was lacking within the vessel of my body was now filling up. My entire body trembled. This was the very first time I truly *felt* mana.

Gerbera completely immersed herself with a face which could only be described as earnest, while Rose and Lily watched over her as she tried to live up to their expectations.

I'm sure they'll be fine now...

The moment that thought passed through my mind, a sense of relief suddenly overcame me. Drowsiness flooded over my body like a surging wave, washing all my senses away. And without being able to see things through to the very end, my consciousness drifted away right then and there.

Chapter 9: The Master's Way

By the time I woke up, it was the following day. My constantly leaking mana had apparently slowed down by then. I still didn't know the reason, and I couldn't really be sure of anything, but it was a relief for now.

According to Lily, Gerbera had continuously supplied me with mana until my condition stabilized. Even for her, whose sturdiness was guaranteed, doing so required a tremendous amount of concentration and mana. She had fallen asleep after confirming I was okay.

When I woke up, I found her collapsed right over me and sleeping. Thinking back on it, she did say she wasn't very good at manipulating mana like this.

"Well done."

I brushed her white head, and her legs chittered in response. Her beautiful face was accompanied by a truly satisfied smile, as if she had accomplished something great.



"You really saved me this time," I said to Lily, who was standing behind me as I sat on a stool.

We were currently in a small room within the arachne nest. This was the bathing area Rose had made while I was absent. Having said that, it was nothing more than a small space with a cylindrical tub big enough for someone to get inside and a partition around it. There wasn't anyone else with us. It had been quite a while since I had time alone with Lily.

"And I mean both for healing me and handling Gerbera. I have no idea how things would've gone if you weren't here. Sorry for troubling you with all this."

"It's fine. I don't mind at all."

Lily, who was wearing a school jersey, forced a smile as she snipped at my hair using scissors Rose had made.



After nearly two months of living in the wild, my hair had grown quite a bit. And because of the fireballs from the blowfoxes, a portion of it was singed off and rather lopsided now. So, I asked Lily to even it out for me. I only ever got my hair cut at a cheap barbershop anyway, so I didn't mind leaving it to an amateur. It was fine as long as it looked presentable.

"I said it back then too: I'm everyone's big sister. I only did what was obvious for me to do."

"You're right, you did."

"Actually, I'd like you to praise Rose too. I didn't think she'd accept Gerbera like that."

"Yeah. I thought it'd take more time too. I was worried their relationship would break down because Gerbera wasn't able to protect me."

"Same here. I thought Rose was more stubborn than that. But it looks like she put some thought into her relationship with Gerbera in her own way."

"Seems so."

"Gerbera did her best too, of course. Today's medal for hard work definitely goes to her."

My hair fluttered down my back as I sat there with nothing but a towel wrapped around my waist. I was going to have to wash my hair after this anyway, so I figured I would also wash the sweat and dirt off my body while I was at it.

Lily was here as my caretaker to help me with my bath. By that I mean I wasn't able to move my body properly yet. This wasn't a side effect of receiving mana from Gerbera, much like she feared, but simply a matter of being debilitated and lacking stamina. In any case, my body still felt sluggish.

Fortunately, for now at least, my body wasn't malfunctioning in any other way. The only marks left were light discolorations where I was burned or where bullet creeper seeds were removed. I couldn't let down my guard, though. It was possible I simply didn't notice the poor condition of my own body. In the end, we didn't know why I was starved for mana. That was the other reason Lily was accompanying me here.

"Gerbera's efforts really did save me," I said with a sigh as I listened to the pleasant sound of the scissors snipping away. "Same with you and Rose. All of you have grown so much, before I even knew it... I didn't notice it at all. It just goes to show how narrow my vision was."

"There's no helping that." Lily finished evening things out, and after snipping the scissors in the air a few times, she went on to

arranging the ends of my hair. "I know how dearly you think of us, Master. The friction between Rose and Gerbera was surely a major problem for you. The more important the matter is, the more energy humans spend spinning their wheels on trying to solve it. It's normal."

"Normal, huh?"

"Mm. Normal... Oh, please close your eyes, Master."

Lily finished with my haircut, filled a small bucket with water, and began washing my head. Her slender fingers pushed through my hair and tickled my scalp. Water flowed down my chin and streamed to the floor. I kept my eyes closed and continued our conversation.

"You may be right."

"Hm?"

"About how I was spinning my wheels in a panic." Thinking back, carelessly chasing that blowfox into a giant pack might have been a result of such panic. "I was in a rush to do *something*, anything, and as a result, I nearly died. Not only that, I almost materially damaged the relationship between Rose and Gerbera by doing so..."

Lily finished washing my hair and began wiping me off with a towel. She then helped me into the tub filled with water. To be honest, I would've preferred a hot bath, but just being able to dip in a cold bath was sufficiently refreshing. My state of mind detracted from the pleasure, though.

"How pathetic. I'm supposed to be leading everyone."

Perhaps because I relaxed my focus a bit, the weakness I had pushed deep into my heart began spilling from my lips.

"I never have any composure, I fret about personal matters, and I drive myself into a corner. The plans I come up with are full of holes. I don't even have the strength to solve your problems."

As I laid on the brink of death from mana deficiency, I saw everything that had led up to that moment flash before my eyes. "Why did it come to this?" I thought. Looking back on it now, the answer was clear. I couldn't live up to the title of Master. That was all. Lily said it was normal to spin one's wheels in a panic. However, normal wasn't good enough. I was their master, after all.

Because I wasn't capable enough as a master, we ended up making such an enormous blunder. The girls managed to make it through the crisis, but that was all just in hindsight. It didn't change the fact that I couldn't do anything. They definitely grew up. But I was still no good.

"I panicked, spun my wheels, and couldn't accomplish anything. I couldn't obtain anything." My sigh felt heavy, and my breath felt like it was rotting in my lungs. "I'm so pathetic."

"Master..."

Lily was still holding on to me to help me into the bath, but she stopped moving as she looked up at my face. Her big eyes gazed into

mine. I returned her gaze, and then she closed her eyes. She was thinking of something, but I couldn't tell what. Our mental path didn't relay such thoughts.

"...Hey, Master." She looked back up at me with a smile like a blooming flower. "There's nothing that can be done about that, right?"

Those were not just kind words meant to comfort me. Her smile had a strange impact to it.

"L-Lily..."

I reflexively tried to shrink back, but I was currently in a tub. There was nowhere to go. I tried to pretend I didn't notice her behavior, but unfortunately, we were tied by our mental path. I could feel her emotions piercing through me, and she felt mine as well. Moreover, she had no intention of hiding them.

"I'm actually quite angry this time, you know?"

Standing on her knees, Lily drew closer with a slight furrow to her brow. The sound of splashing water filled the room. Her jersey was getting wet, but she paid no attention to that. I arched my upper body back, and Lily leaned even closer. Her hands, which could only be described as dainty, grabbed my arms as if preventing me from escaping.

"Why didn't you consult me? Why did you try and do everything yourself? Why can't you rely on us?"

"...Can't rely on you? What are you saying? There's no way that's the case."

"So, it's a misunderstanding?"

I nodded in protest. "If all of you weren't with me, I would've been eaten by monsters long ago. I at least know that much. There's no way I'd ever think of you as unreliable."

"There's no way, huh? Mm. I bet so." Lily nodded in an awfully frank manner, her smile bittersweet. "It's just as you say, Master. You've likely never thought of us as unreliable." Her smile seemed sorrowful now. "And yet, you didn't rely on us."

"..."

"Even though you think we're reliable, you *couldn't* rely on us... Am I wrong?"

This time, I couldn't find the words to object. It was undeniably true I kept everything from my servants. There was the matter between Rose and Gerbera, my problem with Katou, how I let Gerbera fawn over me when I broke down, and how I just tried to gloss that over at first. There was also the abnormality with my eyesight.

I didn't rely on the companions I knew were reliable. I tried to carry all my burdens on my own. Now that it was pointed out to me, it was clear I had such a disposition. However, I did have something to say for myself.

“I’m your master. I have the responsibility to lead all of you. This falls under such responsibility.”

I had to be able to resolve the problems of my servants as their master. I had to resolve my own problems. I couldn’t possibly burden them with these. That was the responsibility of a leader. Though I lamented my own lack of ability to do so, the stance itself wasn’t a problem. It wasn’t supposed to be.

But Lily’s flaxen hair swayed in the air as she shook her head. “That’s wrong. Why can’t you tell? If you try and carry absolutely everything all on your own, it’s only natural you’ll fail.”

“That’s... That’s because I lack the ability.”

“Is it wrong to lack that? Aren’t we servants here to make up for it?”

I caught Lily’s upturned gaze, and my heart leapt. Unable to withstand the intensity of her own emotions, her eyes shook like the surface of a lake. That single gaze held more than enough force to shake my trivial sense of pride.

“I understand, okay? I also know you have a strong sense of responsibility, and you often blame yourself. I know, but...” Tears spilled from Lily’s eyes. “I know you want to try and carry everything on your own... But please rely on us a little...”

“Lily...”

Seeing her tear-stained face suddenly reminded me of something. Back when I returned here in a mess after falling prey to the blowfoxes’ trap, Lily looked quite shaken at first. However, she carried out my treatment from beginning to end with full control over her emotions. The Lily I knew would’ve easily panicked. And yet, she shed no tears during the process.

However, that didn’t mean she felt nothing at all. She had been suppressing her panic beneath a calm mask. To borrow her own words, she was acting appropriately in her position as the eldest sister. Up until this very moment, she was absolutely doing her best. But now we were alone. Lily no longer had a reason to put on a strong front as the eldest sister.

“I was so scared you were going to die...”

The Lily before me, who had suppressed her emotions and fulfilled her responsibility as the eldest sister, was not the same girl who had just eaten Mizushima Miho’s body and gained the form of a human. She had definitely changed since then. But what for?

I wouldn’t claim that I didn’t know. It was of course to support me, just as she said. Same for Rose and Gerbera. They were doing their best in their own way to support me too. So, when I refused to rely on them despite this, it meant I wasn’t repaying their devotion.

I thought I was doing the best I could, but apparently I was

mistaken. The tears spilling from her eyes now were proof of this. In any case, this wasn't the time for me to be drowning in regret. There was something else I had to do. This time, I wouldn't make a mistake.

"...Sorry."

I stretched my hand out to the crying girl before me and hugged her. Lily didn't resist. Rather, she leaned in against me. As I embraced her tightly, she began sobbing in my arms. I learned once more just how much I had caused her to worry.



We stayed nestled against each other for a while longer. It was mysteriously calming. Such a relaxing moment was surely completely unrelated to that failure.

After some time, the sound of sniffing vanished.

"...I'm just using Mizushima Miho's knowledge as reference..." Lily said after she calmed down, "but there are different types of leaders."

"Types of leaders?"

Lily nodded. Her bangs brushed against my exposed chest. It was a little ticklish.

"Like the powerful type who can just force people along, or ones who can lead through pure charisma..."

"Neither of those apply to me at all."

"Mm. You're right."

I smiled bitterly. Lily hadn't denied what I'd said.

"But you know? We don't want to follow people like that."

"..."

"I never have any composure, I fret about personal matters, and I drive myself into a corner. The plans I come up with are full of holes. I don't even have the strength to solve all your problems.' That's what you said, right?" Lily peered up at me. "Being able to stay calm at all times and solve any problem without having to worry, possessing the strength to save everything before one's eyes... That's all just some kind of dream."

She flipped my earlier complaints over and called my ideal way of being a master nothing more than a fantasy.

"If such a person existed, I'm sure they'd be wonderful. They'd be a hero right out of a fairytale. Nobody could possibly deny them." Lily steadily shook her head. "But even if such a person existed, I don't think we would follow them. I mean. They're not *you*."

I could see my figure reflected in her eyes. She was properly looking at me in the here and now.

"I'm not in love with some ideal dream written in fantasy. I can't love some illusion. The one I'm in love with is the master who desperately tries to do things for our sake even if he doesn't have the

strength to do so. Whether or not you possess the ability has nothing to do with it.”

“...But I have to lead everyone. Isn’t it wrong for me to lack the ability to do so?”

“That’s not true.” Lily shook her flaxen hair and pressed her head against my chest. “So, let me ask you this. Would you abandon us if we were useless?”

“No way!” I yelled immediately. “Never!”

“...Mm. I was sure you’d say that, Master. Heehee... It’s actually no good for me to be happy about that as a servant, though.” She raised her head with a faint smile. “But, I’m happy you’d say that.”

She then placed her hands on my face. “So, Master. I want you to know that we think the exact same way,” she said as she gently brushed my cheeks in a loving manner. “Let us support you. Rely on us more. Don’t force yourself to do everything on your own. It’s fine for you to lack the ability to lead. We servants are no good unless we combine our strengths... And I’m sure you’re just the same, Master.”

“I’m... the same?”

“Mm. I’m sure that’s how we’re meant to be.”

I had never once thought of that before. I never even had to consider it, after all. I was under the impression there was no need to do so. All I believed was that I had to lead them. I decided it was a responsibility I had to fulfill.

However, “how it was meant to be” wasn’t something I could decide on like that. Just as Lily said, there were many types of leaders. A group had no choice but to find the best path for them based on their leader’s disposition, as well as the disposition of their followers.

If I did in fact possess godlike charisma or the strength to lead an entire group through sheer force of will, or had the intelligence to solve any problem in the world, then there would be no better solution. However, I was nothing more than an ordinary student. It was vexing to admit, but that was all I amounted to. I was nothing more than a 17-year-old boy named Majima Takahiro.

On that fateful day, as I lay on the boundary between life and death, I became aware of the power hidden within me; I became a master who had to lead my servants. However, that didn’t change who I was on the inside.

There was no way some kid you could find anywhere would be able to manifest the characteristics needed of a stereotypical leader without any preparation at all. It was obvious things would unravel if I tried to act like a splendid leader despite that.

I have to do something as their master.

I have to resolve everything.

It was conceited, in a way, to think of such things. There were

people with me who would lend me their help. There were those who supported me. I was meant to join hands with them, cooperate, and focus on the same goals together. That was likely the type of leader I was meant to become.

We could even do so as we were now. I was capable of accepting my own limits and immaturity, after all. Now that they had all grown, the girls didn't need someone to drag them along either.

"We were meant to work together from the beginning. To support each other... If so, then I've been mistaken all this time, huh?"

This was a new starting point for us. Strangely enough, I came to this conviction within a cramped space all alone with Lily, much like that cave. We had to help each other to survive in this world. This power within me existed for this very purpose.

"Thanks, Lily. You opened my eyes." The girl before me who taught me something so important was endlessly endearing. I could only offer my gratitude as a flood of emotions overcame me. "Please take care of me from now on, and support me."

"Mm... Mm! Of course! Master!"

Lily was also overcome with emotions and hugged me full force. I hugged her right back. We pressed our cheeks against each other and exchanged smiles as we drew even closer despite already being pressed together. Her wet jersey pushed against my skin. It wasn't enough. It was nowhere near enough. We embraced each other as if trying to fill that gap between us. I could feel Lily's desire through the mental path, and I desired the same thing.

"Master..."

Our gazes met, our noses brushed against each other, and our lips drew together. I only just realized this was the first time we'd been "alone" in quite a while. Not that I could really do anything. My body still wasn't moving the way I wanted it to.

As I enjoyed the sensation of Lily wrapping her arms around my neck, kissing me, and pressing her bountiful breasts against my chest through her wet jersey...

"Ow," I groaned slightly as a sharp pain ran through my left hand.

"Oh. Sorry."

My voice brought Lily back to her senses and she jumped back. She looked slightly depressed, thinking she was pressing down on me too hard.

"No. You didn't do anything." I stretched out my body at the sudden pain and then waved my hand about. "For some reason, my hand suddenly..."

I was shocked into silence.

"What's wrong...?"

Lily's eyes also shot open. She was speechlessly staring at the back

of my left hand. There was a green protrusion poking out of it. A small stream of blood came from the opening and slowly dripped into the bathtub. This had to be the source of my pain.

The green protrusion continued stretching out as I stared at it. Finally, I realized it was some sort of seedling. Seeing how abnormal this situation was, it clearly wasn't a normal seedling. The tip was somewhat reminiscent of a snake whose head only comprised a mouth.

"Mass—sss—terr."

And it spoke.

Its pronunciation was odd, as if it was difficult for a plant to speak at all, but it was clearly a servant calling out its master. I was at a loss for words. I couldn't understand why a monster was growing from my body. There wasn't anything at all that could've...

"...Oh." It was a bit of a miracle I managed to somehow find the answer with my mind in such a daze. "Hey, Lily. My memory's still a little hazy, so can I check something with you?"

"What is it?"

"Do you remember pulling a bullet creeper seed from my left hand?"

The first seed that hit me from the bullet creeper volley dug into my left hand. It was so shocking it remained clearly within my memory. On the other hand, I couldn't remember Lily digging out a seed from my left hand while she was treating me. Having said that, my consciousness was drifting in and out at the time. Perhaps I simply couldn't remember. But Lily shook her head, blowing such a possibility away. Meaning... It was exactly what I thought it was.

"Is this guy maybe the reason for my mana deficiency?" I had been on the verge of death because of a lack of mana. Bullet creepers were a parasitical type of monster. It was in their ecology to suck nutrients from their hosts. "Or not? They parasite on trees. It's nonsense to grow from a human..."

"Oh, hang on, Master. That's not quite right," Lily said as she cut off my train of thought. "Bullet creepers attack others by shooting seeds at them, right? Normally, seeds aren't meant to be used as a weapon. They're for reproduction, aren't they?"

"Well, yeah."

"So, why do you think bullet creepers shoot their seeds?"

Now that she mentioned it, it did seem somewhat strange. As far as I knew, it took quite a bit of energy for plants to create seeds. It was a waste to dispose of them as a means of attack.

"But what about it?" I asked.

"It's basically the life cycle of the bullet creeper. The prey they hit with their seeds are used for nutrients where the new bullet creepers

sprout. I've seen it many times before."

"So, it's not impossible for one to be growing out of my body?"

The image of caterpillar fungus growing out of a corpse came to mind, sending shivers down my spine. If not for Gerbera's supply of mana, I would've likely dried up completely and perished. My current situation was altogether thanks to her unreasonable power and great efforts.

"Besides, is this really even a bullet creeper?" Lily asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it looks completely different."

The monster in front of me really was different from a bullet creeper. What stood out most was the lack of a flower. As such, it couldn't function like a bullet creeper by spitting seeds. Meaning...

"So, it's a unique monster like you?"

The monster in my body was likely a rare mutation that seldom happened among monsters. But could such a coincidence really happen? It was easier to accept this from an entirely different perspective.

"Or is it precisely because it's growing in me that it sprouted as a unique monster...?"

My body was that of a cheater. Regardless of how weak my power was, I was still something like a jack-in-the-box who could overthrow any sense of reason, much like the cheater who could punch a dragon to death. It wouldn't be strange no matter what happened.

"...We can find out for sure if I get shot again."

"Don't be stupid. You'll definitely die next time."

"Right?"

I was joking, of course. There was no guarantee I'd survive such an experience for a second time. Gerbera surely didn't want to go through that again either. I couldn't possibly suggest doing something that would put all of her efforts to waste.

"So, what do you plan on doing with this child, Master?" Lily asked as she glared at me lightly for my distasteful joke.

I used my right hand, which didn't have a parasitic monster growing from it, to scratch at my now shortened hair.

"What am I going to do? It's not like I can possibly tear it out."

I could feel a clear mental path between myself and this parasitic monster. I knew full well it had no ill-intent.

"Mass—ter! Ter!"

It didn't seem to possess much intelligence yet, seeing how it was just born, so it was unable to do anything but call out. However, I could still feel its innocent yearning toward me. I would be fraught with guilt if I tore it out and killed it.

Besides, after giving it some more thought, the bullet creeper was

the one who shot me. This one simply sprouted. Even if its parents wanted to kill me, the newborn child bore no sins. The situation was maybe a little different than that, but this was a perfectly plausible line of reasoning.

“From what I can tell, my condition is stable, and I don’t have any reason to kill it. Can it even be torn off at this point?”

Its roots dug into my body, and I had no idea how deeply they ran. At worst, I’d have to amputate my entire arm to be rid of it. The risk was too high.

“Mass—ter! Mass! Ter! Ter!” And perhaps sensing my thoughts, the parasite yelled out in protest with its jarring voice.

“I got it, I got it. I won’t tear you out.”

“Is that okay, Master?” Lily asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. It was somewhat strange to let the being that nearly killed me by leeching off my life remain in my body, but one could say the circumstances which led me to accept Gerbera were pretty similar. And just as that thought passed through my mind...

“My Lord! Where are you, My Lord?!”

Speaking of the devil, Gerbera seemed to be in a panic on the other side of the partition.

“...What happened now?”

“There you are!” Upon hearing my voice, her characteristic footsteps drew nearer. “My Lord!”

After readying herself in a hurry to pass through the partition, Gerbera’s pure white hair fluttered behind her as she entered the bathing area. It seemed she had just woken up. She had a bit of a case of bed hair. Seeing her before us, both Lily and I were in a complete daze. That’s just how shocking her current figure was.

“Gerbera, what’s that on your head?” I asked.

Atop Gerbera’s white, spider-thread-like hair was a single animal lounging about with its legs hanging over the sides. It had a big poofy tail and triangular ears. Its body was covered in fluffy, soft-looking light brown fur. No matter how I looked at it, it didn’t look any older than a few months.

It opened its mouth, revealing cute little fangs. As it sucked in air, it puffed up into a fluffy little ball that would just about fit in my palm. Its balloon-like body then deflated with a tiny puff of smoke coming from its mouth. There was no mistaking what it was anymore.

“A blowfox...” I said.

“...A child, it seems. Gerbera, where did you pick that up?” Lily asked.

The little fox lost its balance from its burp, causing Gerbera to move about in a panic to keep it from falling.

“I didn’t pick it up. It dropped by just moments ago.”

“Dropped by...?”

“From where the blowfoxes ambushed us and here is quite the distance, is it not? With such tiny legs, it wouldn’t be so strange for it to take an entire day to get here.”

We ran away from that spot at full speed yesterday. We hadn’t been able to confirm whether any of the monsters in that giant pack of blowfoxes happened to be my servant. Taking a closer look, the blowfox’s fur was quite dirty. It might have been on a grand adventure while I was lying here on the verge of death.

“So, why is it riding on your head?” I asked.

“Like I know. Ask the small one. I’m not the one lounging about up there.”

“Just let it down.”

“I feel like it’ll break if I touch it, so I can’t.”

Gerbera stared at me as if I had just said something unbelievable. It seemed she had forgotten this blowfox was still a monster. I continued gazing at her, unable to really say anything, when Rose and Katou came by after hearing the commotion.

“Is something the matter, Master...? Oh?”

“Oh my. Things have gotten quite serious here.”

The two girls stared in wonder at the blowfox sitting on Gerbera’s head and the parasitic plant growing from my hand. The bathing area became lively in no time at all.

“Master.” Lily stirred slightly in my arms. I sensed her intentions and let her go, and she got to her feet with a bitter smile. “It seems the mood is gone, huh?”

“...Yeah.” I returned a bitter smile of my own. Our first time alone in quite a while had come to an end.

“Master.”

“Hm...? Oh, thanks.”

Lily held out her hand to help me up. As I took her hand, she looked at me with a happy smile.

“Isn’t that great?”

“What is?”

“I panicked, spun my wheels, and couldn’t accomplish anything. I couldn’t obtain anything.’ Isn’t that what you said?” Lily cocked her head and smiled ear to ear. “Your efforts with Gerbera weren’t in vain.”

Thus, we added my fourth and fifth servants to the group.



Chapter 10: A Scene Worth Protecting

During the next few days, I spent my time until I fully recovered discussing our plans for the future with my companions. In short, we were deciding whether to stay here, head north to look for human settlements, or head east in the wake of the first expeditionary force.

Lily was in favor of going north. “Shouldn’t we go find a human settlement sooner than later? Fortunately, Gerbera’s account proves there are humans in this world, and we know a way of getting out of the forest. Considering your own body, Master, we should get supplies for ourselves there as quickly as we can.”

I’d thought the same until recently, but Lily was also focused on something else.

“You’ve been injured quite badly a few times now, haven’t you? You need both proper rest and nourishment to heal fully. But we can’t get what we need in this forest. I’m worried it’ll one day become impossible to keep things up at this rate.”

Lily had pointed out before that my body was a little thinner than it used to be. I couldn’t tell myself, but she was apparently sensitive to minute changes in my body from spending so much time nestled against me. I could dodge the issue for now, but it wouldn’t last forever. It would be too late after I collapsed. I absolutely refused from the very bottom of my heart to hold everyone back like that.

Rose and Gerbera surely supported Lily’s opinion. That only left Katou. From her perspective, it would be best to head east first, so that the first expeditionary force could take care of her, and then head north. However, Katou herself insisted we go straight north instead. She said it wasn’t definitive that we would meet the expeditionary force if we were to head east. It was a sound opinion. Thus, we decided on going north.

All that was left was to set forth. The time for departure was close, and I was preparing everything I needed for that day.



On this evening, the physical weariness finally left my body. I took Lily along and stepped just outside the arachne nest. The forest was already gloomy, so with night painting over the sky like ink,

everything in sight melted away around me.

After rolling my shoulders a few times, I lowered my gaze to my left hand. “Now then. Let’s get this started. Ready, Asarina?”

“Masss—ter!” replied the jarring voice of a plant trying to talk.

The bullet creeper, now the parasite creeper Asarina—another flower name Katou picked out when I consulted her—stretched out from the back of my left hand. She was like a snake slithering out of its hole, smoothly extending her body and marking her target.

“Go!”

At my command, the green snake lunged out and thrust into the tree five meters in front of me. Fragments of bark scattered into the air as the sound of shaking leaves rang out, accompanied by a dull thud.

“Urgh... Okay, come back.”

I grit my teeth and endured the pain running up my arm as I called her back. I walked up to the tree to check it out and found a hole about two centimeters in diameter and about three centimeters deep. I nodded in satisfaction at the result and gently petted Asarina’s head with my right index finger. She wriggled about over the back of my left hand.

“Mass—ssss—sss—ter! Ter!” she sang out in a strange voice. It seemed this pleased her.

Asarina didn’t possess the bullet creeper’s ability to shoot out seeds. She didn’t even have the organs that made it possible. At this point, I wasn’t sure whether this was something she would develop as she grew up or whether she was a new species of bullet creeper altogether.

It was unfortunate she couldn’t shoot seeds, but instead she possessed physical abilities which surpassed normal bullet creepers. She could move her flexible body much like a whip. She could also deliver a powerful strike by stretching straight out much like she did just now.

I was worried she could be intercepted and severed from my hand, but I found out this was a needless anxiety. Even if Asarina’s body was torn off, a new head would grow back from the stump.

The end of her body looked a lot like the head of a snake, but she didn’t have anything resembling a brain in there. If I had to guess, her actual body lay in the roots digging into my left arm. I felt a slight sense of discomfort throughout my arm because of this, but I was sure to get used to it eventually.

What’s more, Asarina continuously sipped on my mana little by little. This was both to maintain her life and to gather reserves needed for emergencies. Unlike when she was just sprouting, now that she had a will, Asarina could properly regulate the amount of mana she

sucked from me. For example, she could hold back when I didn't have much mana, and she could take more when I had an excess. In some ways, she was something like a rechargeable battery which drew on any mana I didn't need.

From another perspective, I wasn't able to use my mana for anything, but she was able to serve a combat role for me by using it. It was actually quite groundbreaking. With this, I finally possessed the strength to stand in battle on my own—maybe. This was of course Asarina's strength, not mine. However, seeing how I couldn't remove her from my body, there was no meaning in considering us as different combatants.

I had to borrow strength from others, just as before. It was still somewhat pathetic, but I had no choice but to swallow my pride. I didn't want to make Lily cry like that ever again. I would do only what I was capable of. I honestly thought that way now.

"The destructive force is looking pretty good, huh?" Lily said as she stood up from where she was sitting and walked over to me. "All that's left is figuring out how complex a command you can send through the mental path... How's that looking?"

"We'll need practice."

Going out of my way to yell out my commands presented a time lag where I wouldn't always make it in time. In that sense, it was essential for me to move as if I was one with Asarina. The idea came to mind that the mental path could be used for this.

From what I knew about the mental path so far, the closer I was, the higher the rate of conductivity, so to speak. My experience to date showed I could exchange more information through the mental path with physical contact. Furthermore, with her inside my body, it was possible to exchange information and share my intent, to a certain extent, at least. The time Lily and Rose saved me from Gerbera was a pretty easy-to-understand example of this.

Asarina was basically connected as directly to the mental path as she could be. All that was left was to practice passing her accurate instructions as quickly as possible. There was, of course, also the possibility that Asarina could learn to make her own judgments and take action in cases where my directions wouldn't make it in time regardless of communication speed. In that sense, I wasn't just hoping for her to serve as my weapon but also as a semi-automatic defense mechanism.

"I hope it goes well," Lily said as she played with Asarina using her finger. "It's a big advantage to be able to stay at your side at all times."

"We can't physically separate anyway."

Asarina's combat potential was quite low. It would likely be

difficult for her to stand toe to toe with common monsters. However, always being by my side was an advantage which compensated for this. It was just as Lily said, though her thought deviated from mine a little.

“But... Right. So, Asarina is always by your side.” Lily pulled back her hand and interlaced her fingers behind her back. “That makes me a little jealous.” She pouted ever so slightly as she bent over toward me.

Lily was typically always at my side except for special circumstances. Nevertheless, it seemed this wasn't enough for her. Having said that, this was likely what a special relationship between two people in love was like. It was natural to want to be together all the time. It was obvious to stick together using any excuse at hand... I was the same in this sense. Not that I'd say it aloud.

“It's gotten dark. Dinner's probably done, so let's head back,” I said as I averted my gaze from Lily's cute pouting and pretended to be indifferent about the matter.

“Right. You've only just recovered, Master. You shouldn't be pushing yourself.”

Lily clung tightly to my right arm. I didn't say anything aloud, but my embarrassed sentiments were passed through to her anyway. It didn't feel bad at all.



When we returned to the arachne nest, preparations for dinner were complete. The sunken fireplace Rose made was burning bright red with skewered ingredients hanging over it. Today's menu was the giant crayfish, big scissors meat. This was something Gerbera hunted, while Rose cleaned and processed it for cooking.

I took a taste. The big scissors meat was plainer than I thought it'd be. I was hoping for something a little saltier. Having said that, it was several times better than firefang meat. Right now, we were only capable of roasting it, but I felt like it would be pretty good raw with some soy sauce or something. Katou was of the same opinion apparently. She was having a silly conversation with Rose about sushi and sashimi.

The scene of the two of them talking had become quite common lately. They were all alone together while I was out exploring, so they likely had many opportunities to deepen their relationship.

There was also one other unusual scene becoming quite common. After thanking Asarina for stretching out and grabbing a skewer for me, I looked over to my left where Gerbera was sitting. A baby fox was lying on her head with its legs dangling down lazily.

“Come now, Ayame. Must you always sit atop my head?”

Ayame was the name we gave the young blowfox. Gerbera looked up at her with a disconcerted expression. She wasn't seriously displeased by this, however. It would be nothing for this white arachne to snatch the young Ayame off her head. It was easy to see her inner thoughts on the matter just from that.

"Kuu-kuuu."

"It's troubling for me if you whine in discontent like that... I'm the one who'd like to complain here."

"Kuu?"

"...What a hopeless fellow."

The young Ayame was apparently quite attached to Gerbera. She spent most of her time with her. Ayame had a tendency to dart about restlessly like a child, but I frequently found her sitting atop Gerbera's white head or the flat portion of her spider body. Gerbera was often troubled by Ayame's lackadaisical behavior, but she quite liked the presence of her new little sister.

Ayame leaped from Gerbera's head and ran around wildly like a tomboy, to which Gerbera willfully complied and stood up.

"Good grief. Are you incapable of sitting still for a single moment?"

So she said, but Gerbera took chase after her anyway. A charming scene played out before me. Ayame ran about as if playing with Gerbera, and after a while, she ran over to where Katou was talking to Rose.

"Oh? What's the matter, Ayame? It's dangerous over here," Rose said.

Rose didn't need to eat, so she spent dinnertime working away as she always did. She had her knife in her right hand and a half-carved sword in the other. It was dangerous to frolic around her. Ayame paid no mind to this and sniffed at Rose like a spoiled child, pressing her snout against her hard, wooden lap.

"Oh well."

Rose placed her work aside on the ground. After hesitantly waving her hand through the air for a moment, she patted Ayame's head with awkward movements.

"Sorry, Rose. Ayame must be in your way," Gerbera said as she came over to them.

"No worries. I don't mind."

Ayame looked up at Gerbera while Rose petted her head, then she lay down on the spot. It seemed she was in the mood to be fawned over by an older sister she didn't normally interact with much. She looked to be in a great mood, whereas Gerbera stood stock still, an unpleasant look on her face. Rose turned her featureless face up to her while still petting Ayame.

"She's quite cute, isn't she?" she said.

"M-Mm."

"There's no need to stand there; how about taking a seat?"

"Mm." Gerbera nodded and then folded in her eight legs. She and Rose were now sitting next to each other with Ayame in between them.

"..."

"..."

Neither of them spoke. They had completely stiffened up. Ayame looked up at both of them, wagging her fluffy tail about.

"Kuu?"

Katou looked at them reproachfully for a while before she said with an astonished sigh, "Don't just sit there awkwardly. Say something. Come on, Ayame. Your two big sisters look like they have something to talk about, so come on over here."

Katou clicked her tongue a few times and beckoned Ayame over. Ayame looked up at Rose and then at Gerbera before slipping out of Rose's hand and running off to Katou. The two girls were left on their own, exchanging glances.

They were now in a situation where they couldn't take their leave until they had a conversation of some sort. They had no choice but to give in now. Above all else, their youngest sister was now looking at them with her cute, round, black eyes. "Aren't you going to talk? Why aren't you saying anything?" they seemed to say. There was no way the two could go against that.

"This is just something our master mentioned to me before..."

After several seconds of searching for a topic, the older sister Rose was the one to finally get the ball rolling. "That by combining my ability to create magic tools with your ability to weave silk, we could create even better equipment."

"Hmmm," Gerbera replied with interest.

"I do believe it's worth considering. What do you think?"

"Right. I think it's a good idea," Gerbera said awkwardly, a somewhat stiff smile still on her face. "...What kind of equipment are you thinking of, for example?"

"Let's see..."

Things went smoothly once their conversation got underway. Both of them excelled as crafters. It was still awkward for a regular conversation, but the topic of crafting seemed bottomless to them.

As for Ayame, who had created this opportunity, she was curled up in Katou's lap while snoring cutely as the schoolgirl smiled reservedly and watched the other two talk away. The little blowfox really did operate to her own tune, but it was certainly thanks to her that the air here had softened up.

Ayame was definitely the weakest among my servants. Her physical abilities were about on par with a puppy back on Earth. She did have the stamina of a monster, and she could spit fireballs, but neither were at a level which would allow her to endure a battle on her own. However, Ayame's simple presence granted us a certain sense of peace. That in itself was difficult to acquire, making her another existence I couldn't possibly go without anymore.

"It'd be great if these times could just go on forever," Lily said, nestling up next to me.

"Yeah," I replied with a nod as a flood of emotions rushed over me. "I really wish they would."

I could somehow tell such a wish wasn't going to come true. By leaving the forest, the environment around me would change drastically. By stepping into the human world, I would have to face my fellow humans whether I liked it or not.

I was a master who led my servants. I had already decided within my heart that I would live hand in hand with them no matter what happened. However, I didn't know if the human world would accept my nature as a being who led monsters. I didn't even know how a chance encounter with the students from my world would go. I didn't need them to accept me, but I prayed they would at least not antagonize us.

But even if they did, I would steel my resolve and fight against my fellow humans. All for the sake of protecting this very scene right before my eyes.



We left the arachne nest several days later. We were headed north, toward the edge of the forest, beyond which supposedly lay the human world.

Chapter 11: The Journey North

Our journey north was going smoothly. With Gerbera, our strongest fighter, Lily, our enemy detector with a firefang's sense of smell, and Rose, our sturdy defender guarding the weak humans, no handful of monsters that chanced upon us could break our formation.

I wanted to somehow or other add our newcomers Ayame and Asarina to our forces, but we hadn't come across a situation which required their skills yet. This was of course a good thing, but our current situation did demand otherwise. It was better to expand our forces in case push came to shove.

Today's journey ended uneventfully as every other day. After having dinner, I went on to perform combat tests with Asarina.

"...Gah."

"Hang on. I'll heal you right away."

I let out a groan and crouched down as Lily came running over with a healing glyph deployed in her palm. She treated my left arm where Asarina lived. A warm light enveloped my joints and relieved my pain. However, the crease in my brows remained where it was.

"This is problematic..."

My mouth tasted strangely bitter. My voice came out like a groan. Three days had passed since we left the arachne nest. I spent every night training for combat with Asarina. It was still difficult to pass her instructions, but I could now give simple commands using only our mental path. That part had gone smoother than I thought it would. But a different problem from what I originally hypothesized had begun to surface.

"I knew I was really, *really* weak. But I didn't think it'd haunt me like this."

I opened and clenched my fist a few times to check the state of my now healed arm. My hand was boorishly covered in burn marks and small scars after spending so much time living outdoors in another world. It was the weak hand of a normal human.

And that weakness had become a problem. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. This physical law was no different here in a world where the mystical force of magic existed. An untrained human hand recklessly trying to punch something resulted in pain and potentially a twisted wrist.

That was exactly what happened to my body. In short, my arm

was unable to withstand the recoil of Asarina's attack. This wasn't even worth considering if her full power couldn't be brought out at the critical moment. However, as a result of Asarina launching an attack at full force, the pain running from my wrist up to my elbow had me writhing in agony.

"Mass...ter..." Asarina feebly murmured.

"It's not your fault. Don't worry about it."

I gently brushed her with my finger as she lay there curled up just about a centimeter out of the back of my hand. Just doing so was enough to heal my heart, but I still felt the onset of a headache. I wouldn't be able to properly use Asarina's strength like this.

"What to do...?"

I sat down and racked my brain, but I couldn't think of anything. I ruffled my hair and let out a sigh, then I looked over to Lily, who was sitting by my side. She had her finger to her lip and looked to be deep in thought herself.

"Lily, do you have any good ideas?"

"Hmm. There is one thing that may be worth trying," she said as she looked back at me with her big black eyes.

"Really?"

"I don't know whether it'll actually work, though. I just think it's worth trying."

The reason she was still pondering over this was likely because she hadn't worked out all of the details herself yet. Although, even the smallest possibility was worth considering at this point.

"Can you tell me about it?"

"Of course. But we'll need some cooperation."

"Cooperation...?"

"We need Gerbera's help. No need to repeat ourselves, so let's go talk about it with her."

With that, we moved over to the bonfire where the others were. We sat in a circle around the open flame. I had Lily and Gerbera at my sides, while Rose and Katou sat across from us. Ayame was already fast asleep and snoring atop Gerbera's spider abdomen.

"So, what did you need with me?" Gerbera asked straight off the bat.

Lily went on to explain the problem I was currently facing.

"Hmm. Understood. Not that I think I can be of any help..."

Gerbera said with a complicated look. "Do you have some manner of plan, Lily?"

"Mm. There's something I'd like your help with," Lily replied with a nod. "Actually, I'd like you to take over our master's magic training."

"His magic training?" Gerbera's red eyes shot open. This was

apparently a completely unexpected request. “But are you not the one serving as his teacher for this?”

Because Gerbera had supplied me with mana, my own mana had recently been amplified, so I had begun taking basic lessons in magic from Lily. This took place after my training with Asarina. Tonight’s plan was no different. And now, Lily was asking Gerbera to take over that role.

“Are you not better at magic than I am? Are you unable to continue teaching our lord?”

“I’m probably best when it comes to teaching him basic elemental magic.”

Lily stretched her hand across my waist and gripped Gerbera’s wrist.

“Hmm?”

“Come on, you too Master.”

“...Hm? S-Sure.”

I was as equally confused as Gerbera and cocked my head as I held out my hand.

“There we go.”

Lily pulled our hands together and lined up our forearms. I could feel Gerbera’s slightly lower body temperature from my elbow up to my wrist, making me somewhat embarrassed. The feeling seemed mutual, seeing that her cheeks turned a little red.

“You have such pretty arms, Gerbera. There’s not a single scar, and they’re so smooth and soft and slender.”

“Are you not the same, Lily? Your arms are even more slender than mine.”

“Mine are just a mimicry. Besides, when compared to you...” Lily trailed off with a bitter smile.

Her features were an imitation of Mizushima Miho, who was indisputably a beauty in life. Lily did “upgrade” some portions of the back and front, but everything else was a spitting image of Mizushima Miho, making her a sweet and beautiful girl. However, she was still at a bit of a disadvantage when compared to Gerbera.

Gerbera’s beauty was on a different level. It was like she was a goddess, far away from Lily who was simply imitating a human. This was, of course, not something meant to be compared like this. In fact, even if one were to compare them, people more familiar with Japanese aesthetics would likely prefer Lily. Such things were completely up to personal taste. In any case, setting that aside...

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“Oh, right.” Lily poked out her tongue and got back on track. “I’d like you to compare your arm with Gerbera’s, Master.”

“Our arms?”

I did as I was told and looked at Gerbera's arm. It was a girl's arm. It was supple and beautiful in a way that couldn't even be compared to mine, which was covered in small burn marks and scars.

"Gerbera's arm is really thin, right? It's way daintier than yours, which can't withstand the recoil from Asarina's attack."

That only made sense. I was a boy. And despite being a monster, Gerbera was a girl. Regardless of what lay within, it was obvious mine would look rougher on the outside.

"But you'd never be able to beat her at arm wrestling, right?"

"Well, yeah." I easily nodded. "Forget losing, wouldn't my whole arm just tear off?"

"I would never do such a thing!"

Gerbera immediately objected, but that probably wasn't the point Lily was trying to make. The image of Gerbera's gallant figure came to mind. She had pulled up an army of bullet creepers, trees and all, right into the air. It was a ferocious yet beautiful scene. It was absolutely impossible for me no matter how much I trained... Or was it? I more or less began to understand what Lily was getting at.

"Even considering the difference in muscle composition between monsters and humans, it doesn't balance out Gerbera's thin arms with her terrifying strength, right? That's because there's a phenomenon peculiar to this world at work."

"Mana, huh?"

Even if it was physically impossible, this world had laws which were special to it. So, if I were able to make use of such laws, then it would be possible for me to manifest these common-sense-defying phenomena too.

"Exactly," Lily replied with a nod as she let go of our hands and sat back up in her seat. "As a mimic slime, I'm maintaining my own form with mana. Rose uses mana to move her body. The same goes for Asarina. Ayame can use it to create fire. And Gerbera also uses mana."

"Indeed. I use mana to amplify my strength to abnormal levels. Having said that, every monster does so unconsciously without exception, do they not?"

Her wording immediately reminded me of the scene I saw upon coming to this world, of a student killing a dragon with his bare hands. This meant such cheats were born of a combination of a preposterous amount of mana and the ability to make use of it as physical strength. Also, from what I'd heard so far, it didn't require any manner of special disposition to use. It was the same as magic in this sense. There was a difference in skill and efficiency, but as long as they possessed mana, anyone could learn how to do it.

In which case, so could I. Even if I wasn't capable of much, strengthening my body even just a little would improve our situation

considerably. At a minimum, I wanted my weak body to be able to withstand Asarina's attacks. The problem was how much trouble reaching such a level would be.

"So, you want me to teach our lord how to use mana to strengthen his body. But..." Gerbera looked somewhat bewildered. "If so, I still believe you would be better suited to the task, Lily. This is not a technique only I possess. There's no need to try and imitate my way of doing so."

She did have a point. It felt like any of my servants could teach me this, in a sense.

"I am of course not opposed to teaching our lord. But was it not the original plan to have you teach him everything...? Is it really fine with you to so easily hand over such an opportunity?"

"I'm not really fine with it..." Lily said with another bitter smile, not denying what her little sister said.

Lily seemed to enjoy our magic lessons, so that question made her somewhat uncomfortable. Meaning she judged it would be better for Gerbera to teach me how to strengthen my body, even if it meant yielding such an enjoyable time to someone else.

"I think it'll probably be more efficient for you to teach him, Gerbera."

"Hmm. Is there a reason you believe so?"

"Mhm. I mean, most of the mana in our master's body belongs to you, doesn't it? So, it should be fastest to do it the same way you do."

The amount of mana in my body multiplied greatly when Gerbera became my servant. This was due to a portion of Gerbera's mana flowing into me through our mental path. I didn't have much in me before that, so most of the mana in my body currently belonged to her. Lily's claim was that it was more effective to have the original owner of the mana teach me how to use it.

"I see. That does make sense. But there is one thing I'd like to ask," Gerbera said. "Our lord has begun learning elemental magic from you already, right? What shall we do about those lessons? Are we to teach him in parallel? Or are we giving up on elemental magic and switching to strengthening his body?"

"I guess that's up to him. I'm only explaining my idea for how to withstand the recoil from Asarina's attack." The two girls then turned to me in unison. "So, what'll you do, Master?"

"Hmmm." I gave the matter some thought. Elemental magic, physical strengthening, or both. I considered the merits of each choice using Lily and Gerbera's conversation as reference. "...I think I'll have Gerbera teach me physical strengthening." It didn't take me all that long to decide. "I have Asarina in my left hand now. I'll probably be able to provide fire support by learning elemental magic, but I still

feel like my defenses would be lacking. In contrast, by strengthening myself, I should be able to better deal with attacks against me. If I want to fight by keeping some distance, I can just leave things to Asarina.”

I couldn’t get my priorities out of order. I didn’t need to be useful in battle. My job was to survive, no matter what. It was important for me not to drag my companions down. I learned that more than I wanted to after nearly dying from the blowfoxes’ trap.

“Most of my mana comes from Gerbera, so we should be able to anticipate results from using it to strengthen my athleticism, just like Lily said. To an extent, it’ll be faster to just leave the attacking to Asarina. Elemental magic can probably wait until later.” After speaking my thoughts aloud, I turned to Lily with an apologetic gaze. “Sorry, even though you’ve been teaching me magic...”

“Don’t be. I’m the one who brought it up. No need to worry about it.”

Lily smiled sweetly at me without showing any signs of taking offense. I returned her smile and then turned to Gerbera.

“You too, Gerbera, sorry for taking up your time.”

“There is absolutely no need to concern yourself so, My Lord. Being able to teach you something will truly be a pleasure.”

Gerbera’s practically transparent cheeks turned red as she smiled happily. This childish facet of her really did give her a cute impression. This was obviously not a bad thing.

“Thank you.” I gave her my gratitude while feeling somewhat charmed. Then I put my hands to my knees and pushed myself up. “Now then, we’re done talking, so how about...”

“Um, Majima-senpai?”

I was cut off just as I was about to suggest we get started right away. It was the voice of a girl who had been listening to our conversation from the side this entire time.

“Pardon me, but could I have a little of your time?”

She was sitting on the other side of the bonfire. The flickering orange light illuminated Katou as she looked right at me.





I felt indebted to this girl named Katou Mana, who was a year younger than me. Even though she saved me from the absolute despair of being abducted on that evening the white arachne attacked, I had nothing to pay her back with. The obligation I felt toward her weighed heavily on my shoulders. I was still unable to resolve this matter.

“...What is it, Katou?”

Thinking back on it, it had been a while since I had a conversation with her. The only time we really spoke lately was when she picked out Ayame and Asarina’s names. There was a proper topic to discuss that time, and we were going over it as a group, so it didn’t really feel like a conversation with Katou. It felt like it had been a long time since she addressed me directly like this. I only just realized it now, but I was apparently unconsciously avoiding her.

“Sorry for stopping you when you were about to start training,” she said.

“I don’t really mind.”

“Thank you. There’s something I’d like to talk about.”

With that, Katou unwrapped herself from the slightly dirty sheets she always had and corrected her posture. It seemed she had something serious to discuss.

“Actually, there’s something I’d like to ask of you, Majima-senpai.” And her request was something I hadn’t anticipated at all. “If Lily is available, then could she use that time to teach me magic?”

“...Magic?”

“Yes. Given enough time, even I should be able to learn magic.”

This was in all likelihood possible from an objective standpoint. It was an established theory back in the Colony that one could learn magic without cheats, after all. It was possible, but I was unable to give her an agreeable response right away.

“Could I ask this of you?” she repeated.

“...”

Having yet to awaken to any cheat, Katou was no different from a completely regular civilian. It was clear to me what kind of magic she could actually learn. It would likely be difficult for her to learn anything she could use in combat to defend herself against monsters. There was no meaning for her to spend the time to learn magic, much like it was for me before. The only scenario where magic would be useful for her was if her opponent was human and if she were to launch a surprise attack. Like shooting me in the back, for example. It didn’t have much use beyond that.

I felt like punching myself for considering the thought. How could I possibly harbor such suspicions toward someone who risked her life to save me? However, it was true this was about the only use Katou could get out of learning magic. As such, it was difficult for me to cast away such suspicions. Her request to learn magic was the same as her asking for a weapon. If I could grant this, I wouldn't be worrying about my relationship with her.

“...”

As a result, I could only sit there with my lips sealed.

Watching me sit there in silence, Katou quietly opened her mouth.
“...Healing magic.”

“Huh?”

“I want to learn healing magic.”

This statement wiped away my worries.

“I can't?”

“That's...”

Allowing her to learn healing magic wouldn't be the same as giving her a weapon. I could feel my wariness toward her dropping a level.

So... It shouldn't be a problem to let her learn magic? I wonder about that...

At the very least, it was worth considering. I was able to rethink the problem, but my thoughts didn't get any further than that.

“Could you perhaps wait a little regarding this matter?” Gerbera said, putting a stop to our conversation. Her red eyes looked somewhat apologetic as she looked at Katou through the bonfire.

“This is only if Lily has the availability, correct? Sorry, but I'd like Lily to help me when I'm teaching our lord to use his mana.”

“Help? What kind of help?” Katou asked.

Gerbera's expression was somewhat stiff, seeing how she was still poor at handling this girl, but she responded nonetheless. “I'm a monster. I don't know much about humans. I'm honestly not very confident I can properly teach such skills. Lily's assistance would be quite reassuring considering she's a monster with the memories of a human.”

“You're right. At the very least, I think it'd be best for me to come along at first, just in case,” Lily said in agreement.

“Are you unable to teach both of us at once?” Katou asked.

Lily shook her head. “I think it'd be hard. We'd have to start by getting you to grasp the feeling of mana if you'd like to learn magic.”

Nobody was capable of using something they couldn't see or feel. It was out of the question to use magic without first being able to sense mana.

“This will take a fair bit of time. It'd be hard to do it in parallel to

advancing our master's training."

Katou listened to Lily's explanation with a puzzled frown. "I understand the need to train my senses for mana before being able to use magic. But isn't that the same for Majima-senpai? In that case, we could learn together..."

"Unfortunately, our master is special in this case."

"Special?"

"Mm," Lily affirmed with a nod. "You can call him an exception."

Katou looked somewhat daunted by this. "Meaning... How he can see mana by eye?"

"That's definitely an advantage compared to you, but it's not what makes him an exception."

Anybody was capable of seeing mana given a certain level of it within their body. Lily wouldn't use the words "special" or "exception" because of this. My groundings for magic weren't anything to talk about either. What she was describing were my circumstances built upon a string of coincidences.

"Just recently, our master nearly died from a deficiency of mana, right? We barely managed to save his life by Gerbera sharing her mana with him. And when she did, by pure coincidence, he gained the ability to sense mana."

Lily's explanation brought those memories back to my mind. The sensation of mana pouring through those spider threads into my body was vividly clear, even though it happened right before I lost consciousness.

Perhaps it would be accurate to describe it as the feeling of my very being filling up. I gained the ability to sense what was filling me precisely because I was bled dry. It was an experience difficult to substitute with anything else and extremely hard to share with another.

"It would normally be pretty much impossible to transfer mana to another. Even if we tried it with our master again, I'm not sure we could succeed. It was an extremely exceptional case built on a string of coincidences and the situation of him being on the verge of death from mana deprivation."

Katou could catch up with me if she took the same shortcut. But she couldn't copy what I did.

"Meaning unlike Senpai, I'd have to honestly learn things from square one."

"Exactly. Setting aside the fact that you can't see mana... You'd have to start by first touching someone as they manipulate mana and somehow grasp the flow, I guess? But our master is trying to learn physical strengthening, so I think his training is going to involve moving his body at the same time."

“So, that makes it harder and harder for me to learn in parallel.”

“It’s not very efficient to teach two people of different proficiencies at the same time. It’s not like this is a school where we’re packing people into a classroom.”

“That’s true. How unfortunate.”

No matter how we looked at it, we didn’t have the leisure to accommodate her. Katou understood this as well, having accompanied us all this time. She quickly drew back her request.

“Is that okay with you?” Lily asked.

“I don’t want to learn magic so much that I’m willing to cause all of you trouble,” she replied without any reluctance. “Sorry for being a bother.”

Katou lowered her head to us.

“...”

I felt my heart tightening as I looked at the top of her head.

Is this really okay?

I owed a debt to Katou. I was obliged to her. Didn’t I have to somehow at least grant such a small request? I was able to think such things but unable to speak them.

“...Crap,” Lily muttered as she shot up to her feet and turned around.

“Hrm?”

At the same time, Gerbera unfolded her legs. Ayame leaped off her spider abdomen, landed behind me, and growled while staring deep into the forest. Rose immediately picked up the axe she had laying nearby and stood postured for battle. And finally, both Katou and I reacted. Following their gazes, I turned around and saw what looked like normal human figures coming toward us from the darkness of the forest.

Chapter 12: The Puppet's Request

The shadows squirming in the darkness of the nighttime forest approached us step by step. With my poor human vision, it took me several seconds to finally recognize their contours as human. There were five of these figures pushing through bushes as high as their waists. They were still far away from us, so the light from the bonfire and the moon didn't reach them.

Were they residents of this world? Or were they students from mine? I squinted to try and see through the darkness and found it tremendously difficult to identify their facial features. That's because they were all wearing helmets that covered their heads. All of their faces were hidden by the lowered visors. Paired with the dark gray armor that covered the rest of their bodies, they were dressed just like fully equipped soldiers.

I clicked my tongue. Things had become troublesome. I didn't know their identities. I didn't know their motives. It was a bad blow that they discovered us first. I wanted to verify what kind of people we were encountering before coming into contact with them whenever I could.

There was no meaning in moaning over it at this point, though. The first step here was to negotiate.

"Who are—"

"Step back, Master." Lily held out her slender arm and stopped me. Her eyes were completely fixed on the soldiers as if they were definitely enemies.

"Lily? What...?"

"I was being careful, but our luck was a little bad, I guess. I definitely would've noticed them if they weren't downwind." Lily redirected her arm toward the soldiers walking our way. "Look. You should be able to see them clearly now."

I complied and strained my eyes at the human figures gradually closing in on us. They... weren't soldiers.

"Wha—?!"

The flames from the bonfire illuminated five beings who used to be soldiers. The most telling feature was their faces. All five were wearing helmets, but one among them had a broken visor. The light revealed a man's face drastically changed from its original form. Perhaps having been torn off by a monster, he was missing his lower

jaw. I was just barely able to distinguish his facial features as somewhat Caucasian.

The armor covering their bodies all showed signs of damage and breakage. One of them was even missing an arm. These were surely all fatal wounds they'd suffered in life.

Upon seeing one of them walking along, dragging their innards on the ground, I tasted something sour crawling up my throat. I had seen miserable corpses multiple times since coming to this world. However, seeing such excessively damaged corpses moving around like this had a unique repulsiveness to it.

"Aaaaaaargh..."

Their mouths were half-open, and they let out hollow groans in a meaningless manner. The feeling of death brushing against my ears sent goosebumps down my skin. There was no mistaking it. These were undead monsters, much like the ones who'd appeared just once within the Colony. They called them ghouls.

I could understand Lily's behavior now. Even if they looked human—just barely, at least—there was no room for negotiation with monsters.

"Graaaah, aaaargh, graaaaaaaaah!"

In the next instant, the five ghouls rushed toward us with beastly speed.

"Urgh."

My body froze at the terrifying sight of corpses running toward me. This was the dreadful characteristic specific to undead monsters that even inflicted casualties among the cheaters of the exploration team. Their form brought hesitation, making it difficult to bring a blade down upon them. And the unnatural sight of a corpse charging like this would cause anyone to falter.

However, that was only in the case of humans. My group was made up of monsters. It didn't matter if their opponents were humans or former humans.

"—Hyah!"

Rose took the first strike by throwing her battleaxe. The weapon embedded itself right into the chest of one of the ghouls and drove it into the ground with terrifying force. The monster avoided bisection because of its armor, but the damage was serious. Furthermore, the axe went through far enough to dig into the ground, stopping it from moving. The remaining four ghouls continued their charge without even glancing at their fallen comrade. They didn't have a sense of fellowship to begin with.

The distance between us and them closed quickly. However, there was one other who took action at the same time as Rose.

"I'd rather the dead not draw too near. We can't have our lord

catching some disease now, can we?" Gerbera said as she shot out her web. The thread spread out over a wide area and coiled around the soldiers and the objects around them. It didn't completely obstruct their powerful movements, but it was more than enough to buy time.

"Tear them to shreds!" Lily shouted.

Lily used the few seconds her sisters bought to concentrate her mana and form a blue glyph. It was grade 2 water magic in the form of three swords. The transparent swords glided through the air and unerringly pierced through their targets' heads. With their brains completely destroyed, the ghouls collapsed to the ground. The cheaters of the Colony had already confirmed that the core of these undead monsters was the same as when they were human.

"Aaaaargh!"

The final ghoul tore apart the spider threads and continued onward.

"Gawr!"

And it crashed right into the fireball Ayame spat out. The ghoul ate it head-on, perhaps not even knowing of the concept of dodging, or perhaps because it was unable to deal with such a counter. The small explosion brought the ghoul's charge to a stop.

"Please leave it to me," Rose said as she rushed in with her spare axe in hand. "Hyaaaah!"

She brought the axe straight down and pulverized the soldier's skull. After confirming this, I lowered the large shield I had pulled out and let out my breath. Ten seconds hadn't even passed, and the five ghouls were annihilated in a risk-free fight.



After dealing the finishing blow to the first ghoul Rose had pinned down with her axe, we split up into two groups. The first group investigated the bodies of the ghouls who attacked us, while the other began preparing a new camp a little further away.

Decomposing corpses weren't really sanitary. Even if they were dealt with before they got too close, it wasn't good for our health to sleep near scattered entrails, from both a physical and mental perspective. That's why we decided to move our camp.

Rose and I investigated the corpses. She was in charge of actually handling them, much like she did when we discovered those mangled bodies once before. I was watching over her work. We had enough people preparing the camp, so I decided it was better to have human eyes present for investigating the corpses. This could have also applied to Katou, but asking her to investigate a bunch of dead bodies was questionable, so I put her in the other group. She was likely serving as Ayame's partner or something.

“So, as far as you can tell, Master, these people are not from your world. Meaning they’re residents of this one.”

Rose washed everything using a large bucket of water and lined them up on the ground. I stood behind her and nodded as I looked over the cleaned bodies.

“Yeah, look. Their facial features are somewhat different from mine or Katou’s.”

All of the naked corpses were adult males. Their faces were horribly damaged from becoming ghouls, but I could just barely tell they resembled Caucasians from our world.

“Of course, it’s possible they’re westerners who ended up in this world much like we did, though...”

I couldn’t deny any possibilities. We could only clarify things to a certain extent.

“At the very least, I’ve never seen this language before.”

One of them had a letter in their breast pocket. The pages were largely ruined by blackened blood, but from what I could see from a small, undamaged portion, it was pretty clear this was written in a language that didn’t use the alphabet or something similar. It was presumably a language from this world. If I had to say, the letters were closer to cursive script kanji. Unfortunately, I couldn’t actually read cursive script kanji, so I couldn’t differentiate it from something else.

“Having said that, I don’t know what many languages from my world look like, so I can’t say anything definitive.”

I couldn’t deny this was possibly a language from our world I simply didn’t know of. Corpses couldn’t talk, so there was a limit to the amount of information we could get. As such, I let out an involuntary sigh. I thought I’d finally met humans other than the students here in this world, but this was all it came to. It felt like I was fated to have no luck with humans in this world.

“Have you noticed anything, Rose?”

“I believe so.” Rose finished washing everything off, and then she picked up a few small objects off the ground and handed them to me.

“Rings?”

“Yes, they were all wearing these.”

They were apparently underneath their bracers. The metal rings were quite thin, probably so they wouldn’t get in the way when wielding a sword. A small yellow gem decorated each one, and all of them had different white letters carved within them. It was probably some sort of identification for what unit these soldiers belonged to.

“There’s one other thing I noticed,” Rose said as she pointed at the hands of the corpses. “They have yet to decompose all that much. It has seemingly only been a few days since they died.”

I was just about to ask why that mattered when I suddenly realized what she meant. “I see. So, you’re saying they were killed somewhere within a few days walking distance?”

“Yes.”

Even considering these were monsters who didn’t need rest, the distance presumably didn’t exceed ten days of constant walking. This was something we could cover quite easily.

“It’s also possible their base is somewhere nearby,” she added.

“Even if it’s not, it’s definite that people were there at one point. We might be able to gather some clues. All that’s left is to figure out how to get there...”

“Lily may be able to trace back their path using her sense of smell. They came from the northwest, so I don’t believe it’ll deviate much from our original path of going north.”

“So, even if we fail, we can just go back to heading straight north.” Our journey was only vaguely aiming in that direction anyway. It was worth checking out. “Okay. Let’s talk it out with Lily. Good job noticing this, Rose.”

“It was nothing.”

“There’s no need to be humble. Is there anything else you noticed?”

“Hmm. Nothing else comes to mind.”

Meaning there was no more information for us here. The only other thing to confirm was...

“Was there anything useful among their belongings?” I asked.

“They had some rations, but they appear to be spoiled. I believe it would be better not to try them.”

“What about their weapons? All their armor looks broken, but some of them had swords at their waists, right?”

“I inspected them, but none appear useful.”

“I see. So, we can just dispose of everything... Or not.” I changed my mind in the middle of speaking. “Let’s just keep the rings.”

“The rings?”

“Yeah. I was just thinking that if we happen to come across someone they knew, we could hand them over as a memento or something.” I placed the rings in my pocket. “Alright, let’s dig up some graves and get them buried. Even if they’re not getting up anymore, I don’t feel like sleeping knowing there are corpses laying out in the open nearby like this.”

“Very well.”

“I guess we need a pretty deep hole to dispose of all their weapons and armor too. We’re probably better off with more hands on deck here. They should be about done setting up camp by now, so I’ll give everyone a quick call.”

I started walking over to where the others were. It was dangerous to separate too much here in this forest, so our new camp was still within shouting distance. Although, considering the worst-case scenario, it wasn't smart for me to be all alone even when covering such a short distance. Rose was obviously right behind me as my guard... Well, she was supposed to be.

"Hm?" And yet, I couldn't hear her footsteps. I came to a stop and turned around. "What's wrong, Rose?"

She was still standing exactly where she was before. "Master... There is one more thing I'd like to say. Would that be alright?"

"Of course, I don't mind, but..."

I found her hesitant manner somewhat strange. It was unusual for Rose to speak her mind without me asking for her to do so. So, with her hesitant attitude on top of that, it was doubly strange. Something must have happened, but nothing would begin until I heard her out.

"What's this you want to talk about?" I said to urge her on.

"I would like to propose a certain idea," Rose replied in an indecisive tone.

An idea? Is it something to do with these soldiers...?

I curiously mulled over what it could be in my mind. However, if it had something to do with the soldiers, she could've just mentioned it earlier. There was no reason for Rose to stop me here for that.

What else could it even be...?

I continued to give it thought as I gazed at Rose. She hung her head indecisively for several seconds before clenching her fists lightly and looking back up at me. It felt like she was resolving herself.

"My proposal is regarding none other than Katou's earlier request."

"...What?"

"I would like to serve the role of teaching her regarding the use of mana." My eyes shot wide open as Rose earnestly put her words together with her hand to her chest. "I believe it should be possible for me to train her if it is only to the extent of grasping the sense for mana."

"That's..."

Lily had said this was the first stage Katou had to reach. It was certainly true that her teacher didn't necessarily need to be capable of using magic. Rose could likely serve this role more than well enough.

"I am of course using mana when I create magical tools. I was thinking of using the time I work to help Katou train in sensing mana."

"It's not going to be a hindrance to your work, right?"

"Naturally."

I was just asking to be sure. I didn't actually believe Rose would

neglect her own work. She was so devoted to her job it was practically excessive. That just made it all the more surprising to me that she would offer her opinion like this for Katou's sake.

"I was thinking I would teach her at first, and after reaching a certain stage, we would ask Lily for help. By that time, your training should have progressed some, so I believe she should have the time. What do you think?"

It wasn't a bad idea. That was my honest opinion upon hearing her suggestion. This proposal cleanly negated all the demerits of Katou's case. I did want to somehow or other grant her small request. That's what I sincerely thought, regardless of my distrust toward her.

"..."

However, even though my thoughts were capable of seeing that far ahead, I hesitated to give my consent.

Will this really be okay...?

That thought crept up on me. From a purely logical standpoint, it was fine. Katou wanted to learn healing magic. She couldn't hurt anyone with it. It wasn't like giving her a weapon. There was no reason for me to deny this request.

It had only reached this stage because, by her own will, she'd restricted what she wanted to learn to healing magic. It was as if she had read my mind. In truth, considering her personality, there was no mistaking she made that request knowing full well I would object. In other words, she restricted it to healing magic precisely because she knew I hesitated to give her a weapon. Meaning Katou had a proper grasp of the suspicions I harbored against her.

I felt the shame from her finding out about my ungrateful attitude. And at the same time, another suspicion sprouted within me. I fundamentally couldn't trust the human Katou. It was extremely insincere and should've been unpleasant to her. Regardless, despite knowing what was going through my mind, she risked her life to save me. And now she was asking to learn healing magic so she could help us.

Why? Why does she go so far...?

I truly couldn't understand what was going through her mind.

Because she's all alone in this world? Because there's nobody else for her to rely on?

That was what I thought before. Such facets likely factored into her behavior. However, that wasn't enough to explain it. For example, Lily told me it was fine to lack ability. I also said I would never abandon my servants even if they were useless. We were special to each other. Our bond was priceless. That's why we didn't find it a nuisance to be troubled by each other's problems. We would actually be sad if we weren't relied on in difficult times.

However, Katou was different from them. She wasn't my servant, and I wasn't her master. In other words, I was not a special, priceless existence to her. I was nothing more than a casual guardian who happened across her by coincidence in that hut.

That's all. That's all it should've been...

But would such a stranger risk her life to save me without asking for any recompense? There was no way she would. Even if that was the case, she had more human nature than Lily and the others. If my train of thought was all correct up until this point, she was definitely looking for some form of recompense. I just simply couldn't read her.

Right. Even if she's scheming something, I'm unable to read—

Aah, goddammit...

I couldn't think of such things. I had to keep telling myself this. The question of "What is Katou thinking?" had somehow turned into "What is Katou scheming?" This was practically a disease. Actually, it pretty much was a sickness in my heart.

I was aware that I was jumping at shadows.

I had a grasp of this abnormal portion within me thanks to Gerbera.

I knew I was overthinking things, and I recognized my own thoughts as rather cruel.

However, even though I knew all that, I couldn't do anything about it. That's why people referred to such behavior as a sickness.

"Master."

A somewhat deep voice for a woman called out to me as I froze up in silence. It was Rose's voice, which I was well accustomed to now. My gaze had fallen to the ground before I knew it. I steadily looked back up and was left shocked. Rose was bowing down deeply right before me.

"Please, Master. I want to grant her request."

"..."

I stood there in a daze. That Rose would say such a thing was inconceivable to me. I couldn't even figure out how I should react.

"..."

As a result, I ended up responding with silence.

I wasn't sure how Rose misinterpreted this, but she lowered her head even more. "I understand I am speaking beyond my station. It's reasonable for you to be angry. I will accept any punishment. But please..."

"H-Hang on! I'm not angry or anything!"

In a panic, I quickly corrected Rose as she jumped to the wrong conclusion. I was far from angry. There was no way I'd be angry at her over such a thing.

That's right. There's no way I could be.

This was something I'd wished for myself. I once hoped to hear what Rose wanted, what she desired of me, from her very own mouth. I never would've predicted her request would be to grant Katou's request... But this was still something worth celebrating.

"So, now you can not only voice your opinion, but you can even speak of your aspirations. No matter what that entails, it's something for me to be happy about." Those were my true thoughts on the matter. However, there was one doubt that came to mind. "If it's alright with you, can you tell me one thing? Why are you lowering your head for Katou's sake? What drives you to do so?"

Something I didn't know of changed Rose to such an extent. It was a natural impulse to want to know what caused it.

"That's..."

Rose seemed somehow embarrassed and hesitated to speak. Anyone who saw her like this, even if it wasn't me, would never believe her heart was that of an inorganic puppet. Her behavior was much like a teenage girl. But that only stood to reason.

"That's because she's my friend, Master." This was Rose's reply to my question, her fist clenched in front of her chest.

Her answer struck a curious chord within me. "...Your friend, huh?"

I recalled how Rose and Katou had been speaking with each other quite frequently lately. I only just realized they were talking like good friends. It also explained the change Rose was going through. For better or worse, people all changed in their own ways. That was no different for a puppet with a will. Being able to express her opinions and hopes like this was surely just the tip of the iceberg. As far as I could tell, Katou was having a positive effect on her. In other words, Katou was at least a good friend to Rose.

"Got it." The moment that thought passed through my mind, I was able to speak immediately as if my earlier hesitation had all been a lie. "Go ahead and teach Katou how to handle mana."

"Is that alright?" Rose asked, unable to hide her astonishment.

"Yeah," I replied with a nod.

I tightly clenched my sweaty hand. The image of my classmates' horrendous and twisted smiles looking down on me the day the Colony fell came to mind. I was still unable to overcome the malice of the ghosts of my past. It was pathetic, but I also understood it. I wasn't that strong a person. That was why I still couldn't trust Katou, a human. However...

"I can trust you, Rose. I'm sure nothing bad will come of it."

She undoubtedly heard this in a different manner from what I meant. I was certain she interpreted it as "I'm sure you'll be able to guide Katou properly." That in of itself was fine, seeing how my goal

in saying it aloud wasn't to get across my intent to her. I said it to force that hopeless portion within me to yield.

I could trust Rose. She said Katou was her friend. She wanted to do something for her very first friend. So, as Rose's master, I wanted to support her. There was nothing to hesitate over. Not only that, it was perfectly natural for me to accommodate my dear Rose's friend.

"I'll leave Katou to you, okay?"

This was the best logical loophole I could jump through to recompense Katou as I was now.

"..."

Before I knew it, the ghosts in my mind were no longer visible. As I took a slow sigh of relief over this, Rose bowed down once more.

"Thank you very much, Master."

"...Don't worry about it. I'm the one who should be thanking you."

Rose didn't seem to understand me. She looked back up at me curiously.

"Excuse me, Master. What exactly do you mean?"

"It's fine if you don't get it."

I smiled ever so slightly and turned on my heel. I had to go call the others to get some help to bury these bodies. This time, Rose followed behind me.

"...Oh, right." After a few seconds, I suddenly remembered something and came to a stop as I looked back. "Setting aside Katou's matter, is there anything you desire for yourself, Rose?"

As long as she didn't understand that she was actually doing something for me here, thanking her was nothing more than simple self-satisfaction on my part. That's why I wanted to at least reward the work she was unaware she was doing for me. That was my thought process.

"You've really done well for me up until now. If there's anything you want, then I'd like to grant it to you."

"I don't really..."

"I'll just cut you off there. There's no need to hold back. Think of it as being for my sake. Be as self-indulgent as you want. Is there anything?"

Her reservations were well within my expectations, so I repeated my question. Rose was likely still holding back her desires, but she inevitably realized I had no intention of backing down.

After a few seconds of thinking it over, she gave me her answer.

"Then... just one thing." In a complete change from earlier, she was acting extremely timid. It was an entirely different matter when it came to herself. This awkwardness of hers was rather cute. "I don't mind if it's just for a small amount of time each day, but I would like time to make things other than equipment."

“So, you want free time?”

Thinking back on it, Rose worked day and night ever since I met her. As for my other servants, Lily had time to deepen her intimacy with me, scant as it was, and Gerbera enjoyed spending time taking care of Ayame. And yet, Rose had no such time. I was stupid for not noticing. Even she required some free time.

Fortunately, we weren't in an urgent situation right now. Furthermore, seeing how we were on the move, there was no meaning in stockpiling equipment, so she had time to spare. It was quite like her to want to use that time to make something, though.

“I don't mind. Do as you like.”

“Th-Thank you.”

After getting my permission, though her featureless face couldn't express emotion, her voice conveyed her happiness. I was glad she reacted in such a way and casually touched on the subject just to chat.

“By the way, have you decided on what you want to make?”

“Th-That's...”

“Hm?”

It was strange. I felt like I saw Rose's entire body stiffen up with a jolt. But there was no reason for her to be agitated by my question.

“That's, um... something, cute?”

“What's with that?”

Her explanation was rather vague considering her personality. Was this perhaps... her being embarrassed? In that case, Rose wanted to make something that would be embarrassing if I knew about it. My only hint was something cute.

“Are you planning on making a cute doll or something?”

“Y-Yes. Exactly.”

I was just joking, but she acknowledged me regardless. This was quite astonishing. Rose was just full of surprises tonight. That said, all of them were happy surprises. Even now, I was glad to discover a new facet to her.

“You're also a girl, I see.”

“Y-Yes. Th-That's mostly right...”

Rose was acting strangely suspicious. I didn't think it was something to be that embarrassed over. It certainly didn't fit her sober and honest image, but I didn't think this side of her was bad. Regardless, it wasn't very nice to drag this conversation on if she found it embarrassing. With that, I decided not to press her any further and added one last thing.

“If it's okay with you, could you show me when you're done?” I had plenty of interest in anything Rose wanted to make.

“Y-Yes. Very well. Please look forward to it.”

“Great. I'll do just that,” I replied with a smile before moving my

feet once more.

—It would be some time before I remembered this little exchange of ours.

Chapter 13: The Small Path in the Forest

The following day, we started retracing the steps of the ghouls. They meandered every now and then, but they largely wandered in a straight line from the northwest. Using her firefang sense of smell, even if inferior to the original, Lily was able to follow the traces of blood and whatnot dripping from the ghouls for several days without issue. Now we needed to think of what to do in case we actually came across people. I talked it over with my servants at night as we sat around the bonfire for dinner.

“If we come in contact with humans, I’m thinking myself, Lily, and also Katou should be the ones to meet them. I’d like everyone else to be on standby.”

Obviously, the ones that would be left behind erupted in protest.

“Wh-What?! Why is that, My Lord?!”

“It’s dangerous, Master. Please allow us to accompany you as well.”

“Even if you tell me that... We don’t have a choice, right? Unlike Lily, you two can’t hide the fact that you’re monsters.”

Much like when we found Kaga, it was my policy to hide my ability when encountering humans. I didn’t know how the people of this world would react to monsters, and it was best to hide the cards I had in hand when faced with those of my world.

However, this naturally restricted who could accompany me. Setting aside Asarina, who couldn’t leave my arm, Lily was about the only one who could. My servants were well aware of my thought process regarding this. Having said that, convincing them was an entirely different matter.

“I shall come with you, My Lord! Like I could possibly loiter in this forest when you may be in danger!” Gerbera’s legs skittered from her excessive agitation. Her spider body loomed over me.

“I mean, there’s no way of hiding that, is there? Or do you have some kind of idea?”

“All I need do is tear off everything from the waist down! I’m no different from a human above my waist!”

“...There’s no way that’s okay. Where can you find humans capable of moving around without a lower body? That’s horror movie material.”

Her idea was lacking at a fundamental level. Even the incarnation of tyranny couldn't possibly survive after tearing off her lower body.

"B-But..." she groaned, perhaps aware she was being unreasonable.

She was thinking with her emotions right now. She likely understood the circumstances, but with the blood rushing to her head, she was unable to make a calm decision. There was no choice but to take the time to convince her. And the moment I thought so, Ayame yipped from atop Gerbera's white head.

"Kuu kuu!"

She had been lazily dangling her limbs from Gerbera's head up until now, but she leaped off with vigor. All gazes gathered upon her, wondering what she was up to. She made a beeline toward Lily after landing. Or perhaps pouncing was the more correct term here. Lily caught her tiny body on the spur of the moment. Ayame flailed her little legs to escape Lily's grasp and jammed her head into the opening of Lily's blazer, after which she wriggled her way inside.

"H-Hey, Ayame?" At the current rate, she would slip through and fall to the ground. Lily was apparently thinking the same thing because she held down the bottom of her blazer.

After squirming around in Lily's shirt for a short while like a little bump, Ayame popped her head out of Lily's blazer. Her round and cute eyes looked up at Gerbera.

"Are you perhaps saying you will go along in my stead?" Gerbera asked in a perplexed manner, her red eyes wide open in shock.

Ayame responded with a yip. Her eyes were sparkling as if to say to leave it to her. She was apparently being serious.

"...Even if you're palm-sized, hiding in her clothes is a little unreasonable, isn't it?"

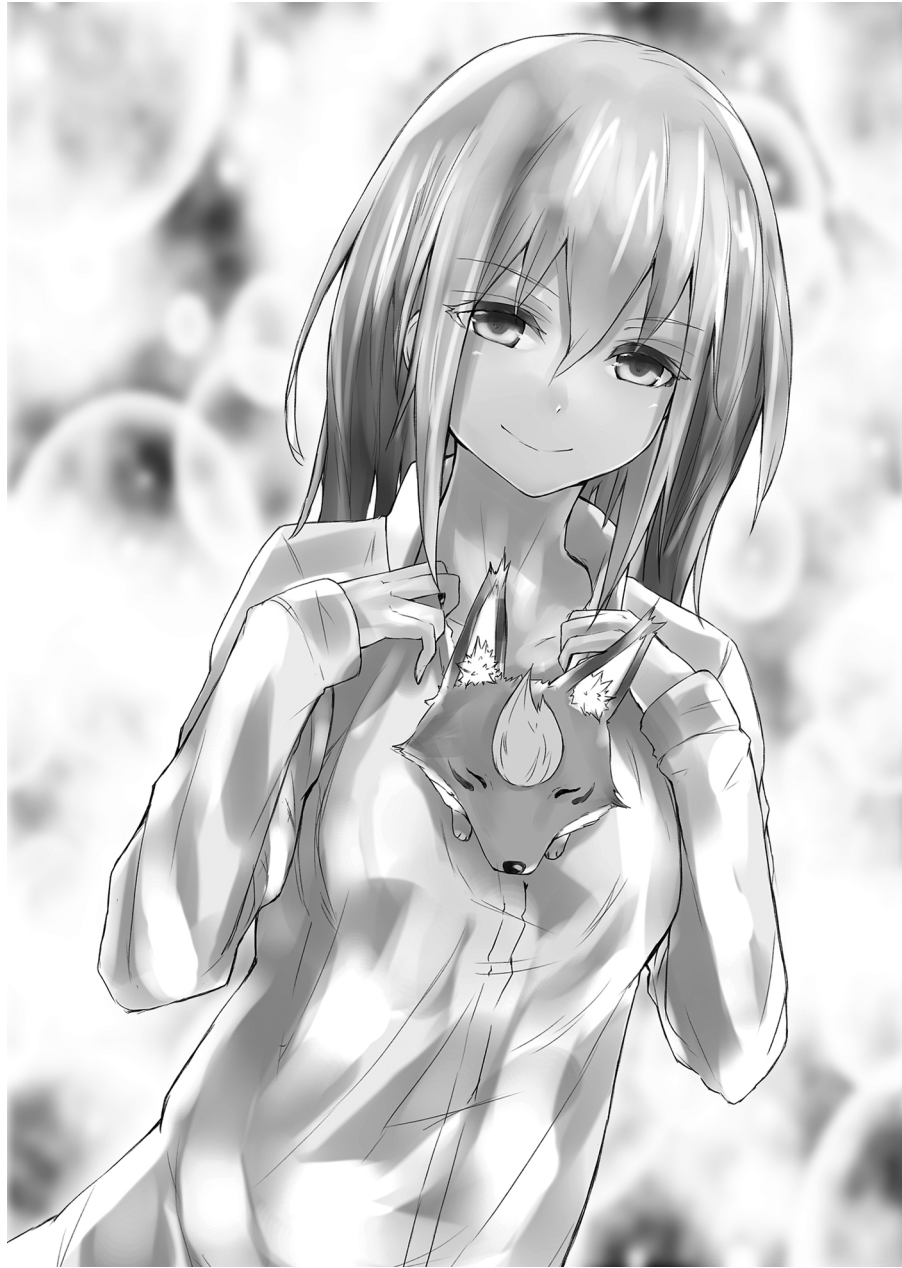
I ended up joining the conversation. There was in fact an unnatural bulge where Ayame was hiding. Lily's breasts were large, but it was still impossible for her to hide there. That was my conclusion, but Ayame received supporting fire from an unexpected direction.

"Oh, Master. That might not be the case," Lily said as she unbuttoned her blazer.

She supported Ayame's butt with one hand and then used her other hand to skillfully unbutton her shirt as well. The vertical opening revealed her slender neck, her cleavage, her smooth abdomen, and her cute belly—all of which lost its color and turned into a half-transparent liquid.

"If I do this..."

With her chest down to her abdomen now in slime form, Lily handily created a small cavity where she snugly tucked Ayame away.



Oh, I see. You can't see Ayame below her clothes like that.

Only Lily could pull off this method of transportation as a mimic slime. It was probably a little cramped in there, but this was Ayame's idea, so she just had to put up with it. She snuggled herself into her new hole and once more turned her cute eyes toward Gerbera. "How's that?" she implied as she cocked her head, to which Gerbera smiled in a troubled manner. It seemed she'd managed to regain her composure from the little fox's behavior.

Gerbera stood up, walked over to Ayame, and then stooped over and brushed her head. Ayame pressed her snout against her fingers, asking for more. Just then, a droplet of water fell on her nose. Surprised by this, Ayame let out a little sneeze.

"...It's raining," I said as I looked up at the sky.

I could see grey clouds through the trees. This was bad.



We were relying on Lily's sense of smell to trace back the ghouls' steps. Rain obviously washed away such scents. It was a common occurrence in this forest, but we were a little careless because it hadn't come down lately.

Although, even if we took such a thing into consideration, we wouldn't be able to come up with some manner of countermeasure. We finally got some sort of clue regarding the humans in this world. I didn't really want to lose the trail. We had to go as far as we could today.

We encountered monsters on several occasions, but we repelled them all with ease as we hurried onward. Perhaps indicative of how far we'd gotten from the Colony, we were seeing monsters I'd never heard of more and more. In contrast, we no longer saw firefangs or magical puppets, which were quite common before.

The rain started coming down in earnest around noon. We could no longer follow the ghouls' tracks. By that time, however, it wasn't really a problem anymore. Before it could become one, we ended up discovering something quite interesting. A path through the forest with footprints on the ground. Traces of human presence.



We followed the path half-covered in grass while keeping a closer watch on our surroundings than before. Within one day, we found broken equipment scattered about that resembled the armor those soldiers reduced to ghouls were wearing, along with trampled bushes and snapped branches. These were the traces of battle.

We couldn't find any corpses. They were either eaten whole or already retrieved by survivors. If it was the latter, then it was possible they didn't have the capacity to transport the equipment they had left behind.

In any case, this path was definitely used by humans. It connected to the world of humanity. We finally arrived at a tangible clue. Having said that, we didn't go down the path with foolish naivety. We walked parallel to it while going through the grass. It was so we could spot humans before they realized we were here. If we found one, we planned to observe them for a while and, depending on the circumstances, even avoid any contact.

And as we proceeded forward, one week passed from our encounter with the ghouls.



The scenery before my eyes revealed the forest around me, but it was still dim. It was early in the morning. I wore Rose's black armor atop a jersey and had my pseudo-Damascus steel sword in hand as I took a deep breath. The cold and damp air of the forest spread through my lungs and washed away what drowsiness remained in my body.

The reason I got up so early—that I had Lily wake me up so early, to be exact—was of course to train myself in the use of mana to strengthen my body. I focused my consciousness on the mana within me. By doing so, I could make out a flow like thick liquid. It was unsightly and pathetic compared to the mana that flowed through Gerbera, despite coming from her to begin with. Her mana was like a raging torrent, whereas mine was like sloshing mud.

Nevertheless, it was clear that the mana flowing through me strengthened my body. For example, my current grip strength could compare to a two-meter-tall bodybuilder. My physical strength and stamina were amplified but still within human limitations. However, strength on its own was meaningless. I had to learn how to use it.

"Haa!"

I took one step forward and swung my sword with one hand. Naturally, I was still strengthening myself with mana. It was quite difficult. My enhancement would come undone if I didn't concentrate on it at all times, but if I focused too much, my movements would become sluggish... The memory of falling over repeatedly the first few days just trying to do something as simple as running was one I wanted to forget.

My sword ran through the air horizontally at a decent speed. Unfortunately, I had no skill with a sword. I could only swing it around like a club that happened to have an edge. But a dangerous

weapon was still just that—dangerous. Swinging it around poorly was hazardous.

“...Hmm. You appear to be in good shape today.”

However, the one in front of me was none other than Gerbera. The white arachne could beat both Lily and Rose hands down. She surely didn't feel any more of a threat from my sword than she did from a toothpick.

Gerbera twisted her body just slightly, and my sword hit nothing but air. She stuck out one of her legs in retaliation, which I just barely managed to catch with the shield in my left hand. The heel of my shoe dug through the ground as a numb sensation ran through my left arm.

“You're not watching your legs.”

“Uoooh?!”

She swept my legs out from under me while I was entirely focused on my arm. My back slammed against the ground. I was actually getting quite good at taking a proper falling posture lately. I endured my shortness of breath from the fall and immediately rolled back to my feet. A spider leg came down on the spot I was occupying just moments ago.

That was close...

As that sense of relief washed over me, an impact hit my chest. I let my guard down. Gerbera had eight legs, each of which could move like an independent entity. One of those had struck me in the chest quite forcefully. All the air was suddenly pushed out of my lungs. Pain and suffocation came over me at the same time as my consciousness wavered. It felt like I would collapse backward just from this.

“N-Not yet!”

I stumbled a bit but came to a stop and caught the next merciless attack with my shield. This chain of attacks was likely so leisurely it was yawn-inducing for Gerbera, but it felt like my nerves were burning out just trying to focus on them.

“Ooooh!”

The attacks I lunged at her with never even grazed her, whereas I was slowly losing the feeling in my left arm from blocking hers with my shield. I fell over many times, and she poked at me over and over, sending a dull pain running throughout my entire body. Nevertheless, a moment of laxity would see me struck head-on by one of those legs, knocking me out. Or perhaps one would strike me in the stomach, causing me to vomit everything in there and faint in agony. It'd happened many times over in our training up until now. I requested this of Gerbera myself, saying there was no meaning if the training wasn't at least this harsh.

“Ugh...”

My fatigue gradually built up. It felt like my legs could give out at

any moment. I held my ground through sheer grit, but I couldn't cope with any further attacks against me. As such, I directed an order to my left hand.

"Masssss—ter!"

A vine shot out of the back of my hand as Asarina ran through the air like a whip. Gerbera, who was charging in toward me, stooped down low and easily dodged her attack. Not only that, she twirled on the spot and used one of her legs to sweep at mine.

However, Asarina's attack bought me a split second. In a manifestation of terrific luck, I just barely managed to jump back and evade Gerbera's sweep. Oxygen deprivation shook my consciousness as I tightened my sweaty palm around the hilt of my sword before it could slip out.

"Haaa!"

I stepped forth and took a swing. And the moment I did, the sensation of the sword in my hand vanished.

"...Huh?"

She easily flicked away the tip of my sword. I stood there in an absolute daze, leaving a massive opening.

"You lose points for that one, My Lord."

A light shock struck my back. A spider leg had struck me from behind. It'd happened many, many times now, so I could tell just from the sensation. I completely lost my posture. My forward momentum was enough to topple me over. The ground came toward my face at a tremendous speed.

"Uwaah?!"

Thus, my idiotic scream lightly resounded through the dimly lit morning forest.



Pain ran through all my joints as I used my withering arm to turn myself face up. That took what was left of my strength to accomplish. I looked up at the narrow sky through the trees while breathing roughly.

"Are you alright, My Lord?"

A beautiful face with white hair dangling down appeared above me as I lay back. Her expression was filled with worry.

"N-Not a problem... Hak, gah."

"Start by getting your breathing back in order."

Gerbera folded in her legs and sat down as she gently stroked my cheek in a loving manner.

"Well done," Lily said as she walked over to us. "I'll heal you, so come on over."

She was wearing her jersey to accompany us for training, and she

undid the mimicry of her lower body, picking me up with ease and laying me down on top of the gelatinous bedding.

“There we go. All healed up.”

After casting her magic, Lily checked out my entire body and gave me a satisfied nod. Then she wiped away my sweat using the towel Gerbera brought over. Still having problems breathing, I could only sit there and let her do as she pleased for a while.

“Sorry... for making you do this... every morning...”

“It’s fine.”

I looked up at Lily’s upper body sprouting from her slime half as she giggled. I was currently using her lap as a pillow. However, it was quite a modification from the original concept. The feeling behind my head was properly that of a girl’s thighs, but at the same time, it was accompanied by the cold and sleek sensation of a slime. She wasn’t wearing anything on her lower half because of her transformation. She apparently kept her lower body in slime form while creating the contours of her thighs to her knees. It was a bit naughty, depending on how one viewed it.

“Heehee. You’re moving quite well now, Master.”

“I only remember tumbling about quite pathetically, though.”

“You’ve been falling less lately, haven’t you?”

“...”

“Just kidding. I’m joking. You’re steadily improving. Right, Gerbera?”

“Mm. You’ve been building strength, My Lord. Things have been progressing more smoothly than I’d anticipated.”

Gerbera had been glancing sidelong at our harmonious little exchange while her legs restlessly skittered about, but she followed up after Lily smoothly. It brought a strained smile to my face.

“It’s not very convincing when you dodged everything so easily...”

Even if she told me I’d built up my strength, I didn’t really feel like I did. It was normal for me to sigh here.

“...I’m somehow or other getting the grasp of how to use mana, at least.”

Even as I grumbled, I focused on the mana filling my body and got it moving like a muddy river. Thinking back on it, once I started taking lessons from Gerbera, I was quite excited when I first succeeded in strengthening my body. I felt like a bird flying through the skies. Or perhaps this was what a baby felt like when it first learned to walk.

With this, I’ll be able to fight too.

I knew my emotions were soaring high. I was still just a 17-year-old boy. I admired strength. But the one who brought my excitement smashing down back to earth was, of course, Gerbera. My combat training against her didn’t change at all, even with my body

strengthened. No matter how much I swung my sword around, I never grazed her. Asarina never caught her. She was clearly holding back her strikes when she kind of pushed me on the back and forced me to the ground. Thinking back on how I pathetically vomited and fainted from a strike to the stomach... Any sort of excitement I had was sure to cool down.

“...”

“Are you feeling down, Master?”

I reflected on the progress of my training from this morning in a daze as Lily wrapped her hands around my cheeks. The feeling of her cold palms pressing against my still hot face was nice.

“Somewhat. I mean, I did look pretty lame.”

Lily looked me in the eyes and smiled. “So you say, Master, but you look awfully happy.”

“...Well, yeah.”

I felt down about my lack of talent, but I was fully aware my life had been quite fulfilling lately. Even in this world, where the mysterious power of magic existed, an ordinary person like me had no choice but to take things one step at a time. I knew that from the very beginning, so I wasn’t actually all that depressed about it.

Being able to gradually march forward like this was surely a terrific stroke of fortune here in this harsh world. On top of that, I had people watching over me with smiles as I did so. Asking for more would be far too greedy.

“It’s about time for breakfast,” I said as I brushed Lily’s cheek and got up.

She transformed her lower half back into a girl and put on her jersey pants before wiping off the dirt on my body. Although, the spot we picked for training was apparently pretty bad, seeing that my jersey was quite the mess. It was better for me to change before breakfast.

Lately, I had been wearing the clothes Gerbera made for me while we explored the forest. Its sturdiness was well proven when it kept me from suffering any fatal wounds from the blowfox ambush. Gerbera’s weaving speed and other circumstances meant she was only able to make clothes for me and Lily so far, but our plans were to have something for everyone.

So, with our early morning training done, we returned to camp, where we found a whitish puppet and a girl wrapped up in sheets sitting next to each other.

“You’re already up, I see.”

“Good morning, Majima-senpai.”

Katou let go of Rose’s upper arm and greeted me. She had probably been trying to grasp the flow of mana by touching Rose

while she worked on creating magic tools. This was training for her to be able to use magic herself, given enough time.

"How's your progress?" I asked.

"...It's quite hard. I don't have any experience with mana, so I don't really have a feel for what I'm trying to sense," Katou replied with a frown. It seemed things weren't going smoothly for her either.

"There's no helping that. You knew it'd be hard from the beginning, didn't you?"

"Yes. But it's a little off-putting that I haven't made any progress in over a week."

"It's pretty much the same for me."

"...I do believe you can move around quite well now. I've been watching from the sidelines, and it looks to me like your movements have been getting better and better."

Really? No. She's likely just comforting me.

If not, it was just lip service. The distance between myself and Katou was still a little large. In a sense, she was a friend of a friend, or maybe something more like the friend of a child. Even so, being able to cheat like this was better than before.

"Well, setting me aside... You aren't familiar with the ins and outs of mana, so it's pretty tough for you. Let me know if there's anything I can help with."

"Thank you very much."

Having said that, it was pretty clear what we could do for her. It wasn't just a matter of teaching her magic. There were far more long-term implications. The reason we were trying to contact humans was of course to gather provisions, but the other goal was to find a place we could leave Katou.

We'd already managed to find traces of the humans who lived in this world. If we were to find a human society, then depending on the circumstances, that would be where we'd bid farewell to Katou. I'd already decided to accommodate for Rose's friend as much as I could. I wanted to do as much as possible to repay the debt I owed her. I could now think like this.

"Master, may I have a moment?" Rose asked, bringing my thoughts to a stop. "I completed the piece of work I was cooperating with Gerbera on last night."

"Really?!"

"Yes. Please verify it for yourself."

Rose held out a carefully folded white cloth. I took it and unfolded it, revealing a thin long-sleeved undershirt. Gerbera was responsible for the weaving, but Rose had fit it with slim pieces of armor in various places.

"Looking good. It's better than I expected."

“You honor me.”

This was something I had asked them to create as a precaution for contacting human society. It's because they were prioritizing this that Gerbera couldn't make clothes for everybody yet, but thanks to that, they were able to finish it before we encountered humans.

I started to put it on to give it a try right away when I suddenly realized something. “...I guess I should wash the sweat and dirt off of me before trying it on.”

“That would be for the best,” Rose said as she cast her gaze over to Lily. “Could you prepare a bath, Sister? I shall prepare the fire in the meantime.”

“Got it. Okay, Gerbera, help Rose out with... Huh, Gerbera? Why are you so restless?”

Lily looked at her curiously. Gerbera appeared to be in a panic as she cast her eyes all over the place.

“I don't see Ayame.”

“Now that you mention it...”

I took a look around for myself, but I couldn't spot the cute little fox. Ayame did have a tendency to vanish once in a while due to her energetic behavior. In most cases, she would just be playing somewhere nearby. She had a very strong sense of smell herself, so she never wandered very far away, but Gerbera looked extremely worried regardless.

“I thought she was with Rose this entire time.”

“She hasn't been. I thought she was with Lily.”

“I haven't seen her though... huh?”

The nearby bushes began rustling just as Lily spoke. The fox in question vigorously jumped out. The little furball seemed to be looking around in a restless manner.

“Kuu kuu!”

After finding me, Ayame made a beeline right over to me. She bit at my trousers and began tugging.

“What's up, Ayame?”

She continued to stare up at me with my pants still in her jaws. I could sense her excitement through our mental path.

“...Did you find something?” I asked as my eyes suddenly shot open.

Ayame let go of my trousers. I was apparently on the mark. Her sense of smell was level with or better than Lily's. She had found something while we were in the middle of training.

“...Everyone, get ready to depart.” I had a premonition, causing my voice to stiffen up. “Pay careful attention to your surroundings. Ayame, guide us to what you found.”

We put off breakfast and departed immediately. We followed

Ayame's big puffy tail with Lily right behind her. They were both very talented in detecting others, so they would be able to detect any anomaly faster than the rest of us.

After several minutes of walking, Ayame came to a stop and Lily made her report in a hushed voice.

"...We found them."

Her gaze was fixed on the small path we had been following for the past few days. We hid ourselves in the brush and took a peek. And right there, we saw what we hadn't seen for quite some time: humans.

Chapter 14: Encounter with Humans

I peeked through the gap in the trees toward a small clearing some distance away. There was a group of around 20 people taking a rest there. About ten of them were boys and girls wearing school uniforms. The rest were soldiers wearing the same armor as the ghouls we had encountered before. They were keeping a careful watch on their surroundings while taking a break.

“...Students and locals, huh?” I figured we would find one or the other, but not both together. It was honestly somewhat unexpected.

“It looks like others managed to find the people of this world before us,” Lily said.

“Looks like,” I replied as I kept my gaze fixed on the group.

The important thing here was figuring out what kind of position these soldiers held and what their relationship with these students was. This was directly connected to what kind of relationship we could form with them, after all. As far as being able to gather information, the unexpected situation of finding locals and students together was actually rather convenient.

“Master,” Lily called to me as she pulled on my sleeve. “I think those students are probably members of the Colony’s home team.”

“Why do you think so?”

“They wouldn’t look so exhausted if they were cheaters.”

Now that she mentioned it, many of the students look haggard, even if I couldn’t see their expressions from this distance.

“...Survivors from the Colony’s destruction, I guess.”

Meaning they were the same as Katou. Students who had yet to become aware of their own cheats. I was actually surprised that there were so many of them. I then realized there was a sense of relief forming in my heart, scant as it was. There were survivors. And I was relieved by this fact.

It was the same as when I had found Kaga. I couldn’t trust humans. If my goals didn’t require it, I wouldn’t think of mixing in with them. Lily and my other servants were a much greater priority to me. I wouldn’t show any mercy against humans who were hostile to me.

But nevertheless, I wasn’t such a degenerate that I wanted them all to die. One could say my resolve was somewhat half-assed, but to me, that was fine. It was better for them to be alive than dead. That

perfectly normal sense of reason still existed within me. This was important. If I ever lost such emotions, I felt like I would even lose my feelings for my servants one day. In any case, now wasn't the time to bask in such sentimentality.

"...But I'm surprised they managed to survive."

"I'm sure they've been on edge hiding themselves in the forest this entire time, and then the soldiers found them," Lily concluded, probably having read everything going through my heart.

"If that's true, then they must've had a talented leader. Moreover, it'd be impossible without amazing luck."

"Maybe a cheater was protecting them. I doubt the exploration team members who stayed behind in the Colony were wiped out that day."

"Yeah. That's possible."

We continued to observe the group while talking. A few of the students still had some vigor left in them and were proactively talking to each other and the other soldiers. I couldn't hear them from this distance, but I could at least tell they weren't receiving cruel treatment from the locals.

Hang on... They can talk to each other?

As far as I could tell, judging from the letter I found on the ghouls, the written word here was likely different from anything we knew. So, how were they able to converse? It was curious, but this wasn't the place to get my answer. The important thing here was that conversation was possible and that one could form a friendly relationship with them by doing so.

This made the risk of contacting them pretty low. Meaning... It should be possible to ask them to guide us to a human settlement? If so, what was the best way to accomplish that? Even if I could just wait for the next opportunity if worse comes to worst, I wanted to avoid failures as much as I could.

I wanted information on the circumstances that brought the students and soldiers together here. With that, I could better visualize how to negotiate with them. There was also the option of remaining hidden and tailing them. There was no way they were planning on wandering around the forest forever. Sooner or later, they were likely to arrive at a human settlement.

"What do we do, Master?" Lily asked.

"...For now, be ready to come in contact with them at any moment."

No matter how the dice fell, we had to be sure we were ready. Our preparations were already underway. I quickly took off my jersey and put on the undershirt Rose had handed me earlier. I then put my uniform on top of it. This was the first step.

I planned on hiding my ability to tame monsters, but my clothes would become an obstacle to that. The other students would be suspicious if I openly wore the clothes Gerbera had made. Having said that, just wearing my uniform made me uneasy should things take a turn for the worst. That's why I had Rose and Gerbera make this thin undershirt for me. I could wear it under my uniform and still expect a good amount of defense from it.

I then wrapped the long cloth Gerbera had prepared for me around my left arm like a bandage. This was of course to hide Asarina.

"Masss—ter! Ter!"

"Sorry, it must be cramped in there."

This cloth was also made from Gerbera's threads, so it was quite sturdy. I still had burn marks on my arm from the blowfox ambush, so it wasn't all that strange to have a bandage on.

"As for my sword..."

Just like my clothes, the pseudo-Damascus steel sword could bring suspicion upon me. That's why we made preparations for this beforehand as well. I had Rose create a normal magical puppet sword which was hollowed out. In short, it was like a sheath pretending to be a sword. I affixed it on top of my actual blade, making it look like a regular magical puppet sword. It seemed simple, but this was of course only possible because of Rose's skills.

She had never thought of creating something like this on her own and was deeply moved when I made the request. It was somewhat embarrassing and even uncomfortable to be praised in such a way. Crafting was part of Rose's very ecology, so ideas even I could come up with by mimicking books, manga, and games from the modern world were likely great innovations of the era to her. But it really was like her to take the vague image I described and have something ready the next day, with her own flourishes to the original concept.

All of the armaments used back in the Colony were taken from defeated magical puppets. With this camouflage for my blade, it wouldn't be suspicious. We did the same sort of work on the black shield I was using.

After that, I couldn't forget to dirty my clothes and body a little. It was unnatural to be prim and tidy here. I went over to the backpack I'd taken from Kaga and removed the rings we'd found on the ghouls and put them in my pocket. With that, all my preparations were done. Lily and Katou also finished getting ready, and we once more returned to observing the group of humans.

"...In any case, they're taking quite the long break," I commented.

"Isn't it out of consideration for the weakened students?" Lily said.

"Maybe. Whatever. Let's do all we can in the meantime."

We decided to hold a meeting on our plans for the immediate

future. The situation remained as it was for nearly an hour.

“There’s more.”

Another group of ten soldiers came down the path from the south, the same direction we’d come from. All of them were marching on foot, but their strides were more energetic than one would think considering their full body armor. The new group met up with the ones taking a rest. The reason they were taking such a long break was apparently to wait for this group to catch up.

“...Hm?”

I spotted one soldier in the group of dark gray equipment sporting white armor. It looked like he was giving orders to the other soldiers. This was apparently the group’s leader. And as I continued to observe them, I was left in shock the next moment.

The one wearing the white helmet looked around as if searching for something and then stared right at me. But that was impossible. There was no way he could see us. We were quite far away and hiding in the bushes. They shouldn’t have been able to see us from there, even if we could see them... But my judgment was overturned in an instant.

“Who goes there?!?”

An intimidating voice pierced through the forest. I drew back as if I had just been struck through the heart.

“No way, they found us...?!?”

I still thought it was impossible, but their leader looked convinced we were here. He drew his sword while keeping a fixed gaze on us.

“Everyone on guard! We’re being targeted!”

The voice cutting through the forest sounded young, much like that of a boy around our age or younger. His warning triggered a hurried reaction across the entire clearing. The students screamed as they gathered together, while the soldiers formed a defensive perimeter around them in an instant.

They looked to be standing their ground. This was surely because they had so many students holding them down. It was fortunate they weren’t charging at us with their swords, but we couldn’t remain in this stalemate forever.

Lily tightened her grip around my arm as she clung to me and watched this unfold. “Looks like they found us. What do we do?” she casually asked.

“...We have no choice but to come out of hiding.”

Our option of secretly tailing them all the way to a human settlement was unfortunately smashed to pieces. I had wanted to gather a little more information before choosing to negotiate with them to guide us, but I had to give up on that. I had to eventually make a decision, anyway. It just so happened that now was the time. I

had no choice but to steel myself.

“There’s plenty of students there; we should have plenty of room for negotiation.”

I did of course plan for the worst-case scenario where they attacked us. I’d already told Gerbera to charge in if things looked like they were getting bad. She was extremely powerful, making her fully capable of routing any normal enemies. But just in case, the plan was to cause confusion and run away at full speed. Rose was to support her in this case.

“Rose, Gerbera. It’ll just be for a short while, but we’re going to have to part here. Just do as we discussed.”

“Acknowledged. I will pray for your safety.”

“Take care of our lord, Ayame.”

Rose bowed down, while Gerbera brushed Ayame’s head. She yipped back at her then dove into Lily’s uniform. With this, we were all ready to go.

Am I forgetting anything?

I checked the situation one last time. We had already thought of everything beforehand. Our preparations were done. All that was left was to do our best as the situation evolved.

“Okay, let’s go.”

There was nothing more to it. However, perfection didn’t exist in this world. There was always something to overlook no matter how much one prepared. It was basically inevitable. And this was the very instant when such an accident occurred.

“Katou?” I heard Rose say in an incredulous tone.

I turned around to see what was going on. Katou was standing stock-still. Our plan was for her to come with us to meet them. However, upon taking her first step forward, she froze up completely.

“Ah, huh...?”

Why was that? She didn’t appear to understand either. A bewildered voice leaked from her throat, but it was immediately painted over by painful wheezes. Katou was white as a sheet as she looked at me.

No, not me...

She was looking over my shoulder. She froze up while looking at the humans we were planning to contact.

“...Aaah.”

A quiet shriek spilled from her lips as her body swayed.

“Katou!”

Rose was the first to notice the abnormality. She quickly caught Katou’s dainty body, stopping her from falling over. Now in Rose’s arms, something was very clearly wrong with her. Her entire body was trembling, her breaths were ragged, and she blinked an unnatural

amount. She looked like she was trying to stand back up but couldn't put any strength in her legs.

She was like a snow sculpture which could crumble from the slightest movement. Was it some sort of spasm due to illness...? With this kind of timing? Impossible. To me, it looked like Katou was having a panic attack.

Anxiety, fear, consternation. I could see none of her usual wise self anymore. Why...? And before I could even finish questioning myself, I recalled what was reflected in her eyes the moment before she fell.

A large group of humans. Among them, more than half were men. Her sudden change was extremely easy to understand. Katou had gone through hell in this world. There was nothing strange about her being frightened here. This was actually something I should've anticipated. So, why couldn't I? Why couldn't Katou? It was pretty simple. This was the very first time I ever saw Katou acting so scared.

"S-Sorry... Sen...pai..."

I didn't know this small, trembling girl. Ever since I met her in that hut, Katou never showed fear toward me. I thought since she was okay with me, she wouldn't have any problems with others. I never even considered the possibility. Thinking back on it now, though, everything that had happened so far was actually more peculiar.

Why was she okay with me..? Never mind, now isn't the time for this.

I brought my thoughts to a stop and confirmed Katou's condition. She was so pale even her lips were purple. She was barely capable of breathing. She couldn't possibly come with us like this.

"Rose," I said as I turned my gaze toward the puppet holding her up. "I'd like you to take Katou and get away from here immediately."

We had to get her to calm down as soon as possible. The first step in doing so was getting her far away from here. Seeing how she was unable to walk on her own, it was best to have Rose take care of her. Katou could relax and entrust herself to her friend.

"Understood."

Rose quickly took action. She carefully picked Katou up as if she were handling something extremely fragile.

"So...rry... Senpai... Sorry..." Katou continued to apologize in a delirium, but I had no intention of criticizing her.

"Don't worry about it. This much is nothing."

"Senpai..."

I gave her a light smile and then looked back to Rose. "Take care of Katou."

"Acknowledged."

Rose took Katou and disappeared beyond the trees while Gerbera took up a hidden position. The only ones left behind were myself, Lily

standing next to me, Asarina hiding under the bandage on my left arm, and Ayame poking her head out of Lily's shirt.

"Master," Lily said as she tightly gripped my sleeve.

"Yeah. I know. It's okay."

I took a deep breath and changed gears. I was worried about Katou's condition, but we had something to do here. It was a little different from what we had planned, but it didn't change our course of action. We would negotiate with these people to guide us to a human settlement, and if possible, procure provisions and find a place to entrust Katou.

"Okay then, let's get going."

"Mm."

Nestled up against each other, we exchanged nods and then walked over to the world of humanity.

Epilogue: Contact with the Locals

I walked through the bushes while making as much noise as possible. This was to serve as a cover for Rose and Katou, who were still getting away from here, while also making sure they knew we were coming toward them.

“Please lower your swords! We’re not monsters!”

I made sure to call out to them before coming into sight. It wouldn’t be funny to be attacked over a misunderstanding... Although, I did need them to misunderstand that Lily was a human and not a monster.

As such, I figured it would be best to strike up a conversation right off the bat. Monsters didn’t possess a clear will, so they couldn’t use human language. But I knew we could converse with them based on our observation of the group beforehand. My appeal should’ve gotten through to them.

Having said that, I was just guessing. It was possible I overlooked something. Or perhaps there was something going on we simply didn’t know about. I couldn’t deny the possibility of magic flying at us at any second. It felt like I was walking on a cliff’s edge. Both my heart and stomach felt extremely tight. If not for the sound of Lily’s footsteps right next to me, I was liable to cease functioning from dizziness.

Fortunately, the circle of humans didn’t show any signs of attacking and were simply lying in wait. After we came out of the bushes, murmurs spread throughout the small clearing in the forest.

“It can’t be... Humans...?” one of them muttered.

“Yeah.” I took the opportunity to immediately go along with them. “We’re humans. We’re not your enemies. Could you lower your swords?”

The blades pointed at us began to waver. With this, I managed to clear the first stage. It seemed there was room for discussion, for now.

“I’d like to talk to your leader. Who is it?”

It was meaningless to act strangely hesitant and invite unneeded suspicion. I took on a bold attitude. Lily’s presence gave me the courage to do so.

The murmurs grew louder. All the students looked toward one person.

“That would be me.”

Just as I thought, the white armored soldier who had spotted us

was the one to step forward. He stowed his sword and walked toward us. Upon closer inspection, the soldier had a fairly small build. The ghouls we met all had large, muscular bodies, but this one looked shorter than me. Perhaps taking our caution into consideration, he came to a stop about two meters away from us.

“...Hm?”

I felt like I saw a light floating over his shoulder and I squinted. There was in fact a yellow glowing sphere just bobbing up and down in the air. It was just a bit smaller than a clenched fist and somewhat resembled a poorly made clay toy. It had little limbs coming from its spherical body and two shining dots which appeared to be its eyes. It looked like it was wearing fluttery garments and had a long tail which swayed about behind it.

Was it a creature of this world? It somewhat looked like a monster, but it didn't seem dangerous in the least. All it was doing was rotating on the spot while floating about in a carefree manner. I took a look at the other soldiers, but none of them had anything similar floating around them. Meaning this wasn't something everyone just carried around in this world. What exactly was it? I was quite curious... but now wasn't the time. It was still potentially dangerous, so I made sure to keep it in mind as I returned my focus to the soldier in white.

“Thank you for responding to my request. Also, please accept my apologies for spying on you from the shadows.”

“There's no need. It's perfectly normal to be on guard, spotting an armed group like ours.”

“Thank you for your understanding.”

Upon speaking with the soldier, I suddenly realized my misunderstanding. This soldier in white was a woman, and a fairly young one at that. Her voice when she'd called us out had been deep and somewhat muffled by her helmet, so I thought she was a man at first. But speaking like this, there was a softness to her voice which was clearly that of a girl. She sounded young enough to be the same age as me.

“Sorry for the late introductions. My name is Majima Takahiro. This is Mizushima Miho.”

“The same goes for me. Pardon me for not showing my face.”

She placed both hands on her white helmet and took it off. Her smooth golden hair spilled down in a ponytail, and she looked at us with strong-willed blue eyes. She wasn't glamorous, but she had quite the attractive face. It was like she had the moderate sweetness of a wildflower along with the steady honesty of a soldier. But what stood out the most was something that was impossible in our world: large pointed ears.

“...An elf?”



“All of you have the same reaction upon seeing my face,” she said with a chuckle before saluting. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. My name is Shiran. I serve as the lieutenant for this company of knights.”

Her manner was as if she was scrupulously controlling her nerves right to the very tips of her fingers. A model soldier, or in her terms, a model knight. She had a gentle smile, perhaps made to help us relax. That smile, filled with the sincerity of a knight and the consideration of a girl, was capable of charming anyone.

That was how our first conversation with the people of this world began—how we first met the elven girl Shiran.

Extra Story: Inexplicable Words

~Rose's POV~

“Uoooh?!”

A sword with a steel-like luster reflected the dull early morning sunlight as it ran through the air. The one gripping said sword was a young man, his honest and sincere features tightly drawn in a stern expression—my master.

The one facing off against him was the white arachne, Gerbera. Her legs were intercepting our master as he charged in. This was of course just a mock battle. They had been doing this for the past few days, so there was no danger to his life.

However, it didn't change the fact that their training was quite rough. Our master ate dirt many times over, leaving his body smeared in mud and wounds. His breathing was particularly ragged. If he was to take off his shirt, his body would surely be covered in bruises. The reason his left arm was moving a little strangely today was likely because of an abnormality in his joints or bones.

Now that he was capable of using mana, our master's athleticism was somewhat enhanced. However, it didn't change the fact that such wounds were painful. After having been on the verge of death multiple times now, he had managed to build up a resistance to pain, but that only meant he was enduring it.

The sight of our master swinging his sword with his teeth clenched was unrefined. Nevertheless, he didn't give off a frail impression. This was surely because of the unyielding zeal one could sense from watching him.

“Are you worried about Majima-senpai, Rose?” Katou asked, likely realizing I was constantly shooting glances over to my master.

She was sitting down behind me and leaning against my body with her palms on my arms. By doing so, I was trying to help her sense the flow of mana born within me when I worked on magic tools. This was an absolutely necessary step for her to learn magic. She was truly passionate about learning. I didn't know what drove her like this. Her zeal was perhaps comparable to my master's as he went through intense training to strengthen his body. That was why I predicted she would be able to clear this hurdle rather quickly, contrary to expectations.

“I'm not worried.”

My hands came to a stop as I answered Katou's question. I didn't plan on criticizing Gerbera after all this time. I believed she would be able to train our master's body well. One could say this was a form of trust.

"But I would prefer if he didn't push himself too hard..."

He had Lily's healing magic, so it was fine for him to be somewhat unreasonable. That's what he said, at least. I understood the reasoning behind this. I also didn't doubt this was a terrifyingly efficient way of training. But it was also paired with pain which matched its efficiency. He was simply absorbing all that pain, so it was a little difficult for me to watch.

"It can't be helped," Katou said with a chuckle. "Majima-senpai is a boy, after all."

"Does sex have anything to do with this?"

"Boys have a tendency to be unreasonable when it's something they can't yield on. Getting anxious from watching that makes you more like a girl, Rose... Your case includes your feelings as his servant, though. That actually may be why you feel like the source of your feelings is unclear."

"..."

It was very difficult to understand what Katou said sometimes. But still, I kept her words in mind so that I could one day understand them.

"Ah."

My master's training came to an end while we were talking. Or to be more precise, it was interrupted. He was lying on the ground after eating a good strike. He had apparently lost consciousness and didn't show any signs of getting up.

Lily immediately ran over to him and began casting healing magic. She then turned to us as we watched on and waved her hand, telling us there was nothing to worry about. She started nursing our master after that, and Gerbera came back toward us on her own.

She picked up the bucket and towel that had been prepared beforehand as Ayame, who had been playing on her own as to not get in the way, came running over. She hopped lightly a few times and landed on Gerbera's white head.

"Good work out there, Gerbera," I told her.

"Mm. I see you're hard at work today as well, Rose," she replied with a broad grin as Ayame settled on her head.

Seeing her radiant beauty as she smiled made me cock my head curiously.

"...You seem to be in a good mood."

She was awfully happy whenever she finished training with our master. It was clearly different from her happiness when she simply

spoke with him.

"I-It's a misunderstanding!" she replied as her eyes shot open. "I-I'm not really finding it fun to injure our lord, just so you know!"

She waved both her hands in the air and began making excuses in a fluster. Her vigor sent Ayame tumbling off her head and onto her spider abdomen; she growled cutely in protest.

"Oh. Sorry, Ayame." The little fox once more leapt up onto her head as Gerbera turned back toward me. "In any case, it's a misunderstanding."

"I can see that, but..."

I wasn't even thinking of that, so it's actually more suspicious when you so desperately deny it... No, I can't think like that.

I began admonishing myself for doing so.

"I simply feel like my heart flutters seeing our lord so desperately struggling through the pain."

"Stay put right there, Gerbera," I said as I suddenly stood up with my knife in hand.

"Huh...? Oh." Gerbera's beautiful face turned pale upon realizing what she'd just said. "Y-You're misunderstanding! Rose! It's a terrible misunderstanding!"

"What misunderstanding? You clearly stated that you enjoy tormenting our master."

"Stop; cut it out, Rose." Katou held me back as I began closing in on Gerbera. Because of our previous posture, I had ended up knocking her over when I stood up. She got back up and wrapped her arms around my waist to stop me. "Gerbera's phrasing didn't mean that. Right? Gerbera?"

"M-Mm."

"So, what meaning did it have?" I asked.

"It means Gerbera is also a girl." I looked over my shoulder as Katou smiled at me ever so slightly. "Please give it some thought. For whose sake is Majima-senpai trying so hard for? He's clenching his teeth and doing his best so that he doesn't hinder his servants, so he can be together with all of you forever, right?"

"Yes. That's right. It's something to be thankful for."

"Is that all you think about it? Do you have any other opinions regarding this?"

"...I also find it somewhat troubling."

Katou put her hand to her mouth and giggled quietly. "Right, that. Exactly. It's troubling, right? He pushes himself to do his best and endures all the pain and suffering, even though nobody asked for it."

"...That's going a little far, Katou."

"Nope. I'm actually complimenting him. Majima-senpai is a boy. Gerbera is feeling something precisely because she's watching this

from close up.”

Her words were wrapped in mystery to me, but Gerbera repeatedly nodded her head. Ayame, who was still perched up there, let out a huff like Gerbera was being a bother by doing so.

“Oh. Looks like Majima-senpai is up.”

Katou suddenly looked off into the distance. I followed her gaze and saw my master lying limp atop Lily’s slime body. It looked like Lily had just started talking with him.

“Oh yeah,” Katou said as she clapped her hands. “How about you take care of Senpai once in a while, Rose? It’s always Lily and Gerbera taking care of him, so it should be fine for you to take a turn once in a while, right?”

Katou picked up the towel and bucket Gerbera was carrying and handed them over to me.

“...Very well.”

I still wasn’t fully satisfied with her earlier explanation, but I couldn’t possibly complain about taking care of my master. Thus, I got moving and headed toward him.



“Oh. Rose, what’s up?” Lily asked with a smile as I drew closer. “You’re bringing the towel over...? How unusual.”

She put her hand to her shapely chin, and upon realizing something, her eyebrows shot up as she looked over in the direction I came from.

“So, I guess you’ll be looking after our master today, huh?”

Lily smiled cheerfully as she used magic to fill the bucket with water. She urged me on as I wet the towel and wrung it out.

“Excuse me, Master.”

“...Rose?”

Normally, our master waited until he recovered a certain amount of stamina after his training before returning to camp. This was actually the first time I saw him up close like this immediately after he was done. He was still completely limp because of Gerbera’s merciless training regimen. In just a little bit of time, he would regain enough strength to get himself to his feet. This resilience was also a blessing of being able to strengthen his body with mana. Having said that, he seemed troubled that he couldn’t even move a single finger right now.

My master was sweating profusely. He was going to wash himself off right after this anyway, but the feeling of sweat and dirt all over his body was surely uncomfortable. I diligently wiped down his body as Lily watched over us with a gentle gaze. And just then, he looked up at me through his faintly opened eyelids.

“Thanks, Rose.”

He smiled slightly through his exhausted expression. I couldn't sense any frailty in him, much like before. I could feel passion through the towel in my hand. I could understand where his passion was directed. I was aware a portion of it was pointed at me. I was troubled by the fact that he was pushing himself so hard for my sake... yet that definitely wasn't all. It was embarrassing in a somewhat restless way. This complex emotion felt like a burning heat within my wooden body. Despite that, it didn't feel bad in the least.

“...It's nothing. It's only natural for us to take care of you, Master.”

I was unable to respond to my master's gratitude in any other way as I continued to care for him silently. Such was how the morning went when I understood a fragment of what Katou had said. Not with my head, but with my heart.



Monster Tamer 2

Author
Minto Higure
Illustrator
Napo



“...Morning, Lily.”

“Mm. Thanks for the meal.”

“You’re welcome...”

“I mean, you got your greeting wrong.”

“Ahaha. Morning, Master.”



LILY

MIMIC SLIME



MAJIMA TAKAHIRO

2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT





"Do you know what the phrase
'letting the cat out of the bag' means?"

"S-Somehow or other."

"...Oh well."

"I-I wasn't
really thinking
of the side
benefits or
anything."













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by Minto Higure

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